DARK IS THE DAY, LIGHT IS THE DREAM

I S H T A R

For my Shadow Prince, from whom I never have to run

P A R T O N E

T h e A p p a r i t i o n

CHAPTER ONE

It's a warm summer evening when Hiraya returns to an abandoned house.

It's the vines she notices first. Hungry and invasive, gripping onto every gap in the stone wall that lines it on three sides. The garden is overgrown and strewn with leaf litter. There's a strange residual energy, a humming in the air, like the stillness before a lightning strike.

It's too quiet.

The house has been empty for a long time, Hiraya thinks. *It must not like the silence.*

She walks beneath the house like it's a living thing. It wouldn't be the first time she'd seen a spirit possess a dwelling as its corporeal form. But beneath it, the wind just stirs, sweeping up dried leaves that have collected from the garden and the vines.

There's the sound of something breaking behind the house. Soft, like a twig snapping. Hiraya looks up to see a huge, yellowed banana leaf hit the ground just inside the wall.

Her familiar squawks.

"*Now* you're saying something?"

The falcon ignores that comment, just makes a clicking noise and taps a talon against Hiraya's clothed shoulder where it's perched atop the ornamental leather trim of her school jacket.

Hiraya rolls her eyes. There's *something* strange here, her familiar is right about that. Still, it doesn't feel dangerous, just—

"It's like the house is asleep." When the falcon says nothing, Hiraya continues. "There's no active magic. Go have a look for yourself if you don't believe me."

Her familiar shifts on its perch, then it's gone.

Hiraya has never been able to pronounce her familiar's name. The first time they'd met, when Hiraya was in the last year of her fundamental magic studies, she had asked it what it was and received an answer that was about three indiscernible seconds of shrieks and clicks, then a little whirr of amusement as the bird looked at her expectantly, as though waiting for her to try and pronounce it.

She'd never asked again.

Hiraya waits for a few seconds to see if the bird will come back right away. When it doesn't, Hiraya goes upstairs, slides her key into the lock, and turns the handle—right, then left, then around twice anticlockwise, the gears turning easily once it recognizes Hiraya's magical signature.

It's even stiller inside. Instantly, Hiraya's theory that the house has been empty for some time creeps several steps closer to true. There's a fine layer of dust on nearly everything; Hiraya can see it where it's suspended in the air through a beam of early evening light.

She opens her mouth to speak, closes it again. It's a habit long ingrained to announce her presence when she comes home so

Arawan can envelop her in a hug that sends both of them teetering to the side before Hiraya even gets her bags off her shoulder.

“Hia, can’t breathe here.”

“I don’t care. Look at you! My baby sister, a master alchemist!”

The words don’t come, so Hiraya can’t correct her brother with the words that are on her tongue even now: *I’m not a master yet, Hia. I still have another year to go.*

Silence. Dust floats in the air, the house sleeps. It’s like it doesn’t even breathe.

For a few long minutes, Hiraya just stands there, her back to the kitchen as she faces the main living area, surveying everything in it and watching as the little glimmers of magic shine over every surface.

Or don’t, she thinks. There is truly nothing, or—well. At least, nothing that she can see.

As she thinks, Hiraya runs a finger absently over the braided leather cord at her neck. Her parents had made it before they died: an artificer and a charmer, the cord is designed to warn of danger, and only a member of their family can remove it. Arawan has one as well.

Hiraya hears flapping wings behind her and turns as her familiar flies through the open front door and alights on the back of her father’s old reading chair, looking around the house before it fixes its eyes on Hiraya. “Didn’t find anything, hm.”

The falcon doesn't answer, just keeps watching Hiraya like a—well.

There's an indignant click behind her. Despite her growing unease, Hiraya laughs under her breath. "Sorry. I know, falcons and hawks are not the same thing."

The room falls quiet again as Hiraya looks around, considering. With how faded everything is, it's too light in the house to see very much residual magic. A beat later, Hiraya raises a hand and flicks it as though snatching an insect out of the air, then pulls her hand slowly down as the light in the room shifts from early evening to dusk, the excess light collecting over her open palm.

There aren't many places to look. There are only five rooms in the rest of the house: her and Arawan's bedrooms, the workroom, and the bathroom are the only ones that are ever used. Her parents' former bedroom remains locked most of the time.

Hiraya starts in her own room just to check it off the list, blocking the light with her other hand as best she can. Predictably, there's nothing in her room, and she's expectant when she crosses the short hall into Arawan's room.

Nothing there, either. The bed is made and there's a fine layer of dust over it. Arawan's closet door is open, but the strongest trace of magic still clinging to his clothes is a tiny, red-gold thread that disperses like smoke in the gust of air that follows when Hiraya opens the door, dissipating it to nothing.

Hiraya walks in anyway. She runs her hand overtop the short bookcase in the entryway, feeling the dust collect on her fingertips. Sits on the bed, ignoring the sudden dryness in her

throat as she pulls the ball of sunlight close to her chest, darkening the room even further.

There's nothing. Anywhere. Hiraya gets up, walks out of the room, starts to close the door behind her. Just before it clicks shut, Hiraya flicks a bit of sunlight from her palm back into Arawan's bedroom, then her own, then pulls both doors closed.

There's nothing in the bathroom when Hiraya glances in the open door. So she moves on to the workroom, closing her eyes as she walks inside and steeling herself against the gut punch of feeling that's about to come. She takes a breath, lets it out, then opens her eyes.

The thing about magic residuals is that they decay over time. With the exception of very powerful relics, the amount of magic that lingers over a thing decreases—first quickly, then slowly. Never quite fading completely, but eventually, any residuals that may be left are beyond detection.

The more magic something has been infused with over its lifetime, the more magic it holds. It's not a uniform exchange, of course; what something is made of is every bit as important as how powerful the magic user who made or used it, and some materials hold magic better than others. But this…

Her father is everywhere here. Her mother too, shimmering lavender-violet residuals that float atop her spellbooks that line the lower bookshelves and the shelves under the counters and around hinges and seals in the room's various machines, especially the mouth of the enormous copper still in the corner of the room. Her pa's more muted, blue-green residuals glint off the curving metal of the still and along the pipes that line

the ceiling, an elaborate setup he once used to produce their family's livelihood.

For a long moment, she doesn't move, just looks and looks into this last place in the world her parents are anything close to alive. Because the still is running—the condenser in the corner is pulling water out of the humid coastal air as though someone forgot to turn a faucet all the way off, sending a steady drip of water into the collection chamber where it evaporates before it reaches the bottom. There's no sound at all.

But neither is there any sign of Arawan. Unlike the residuals in Arawan's bedroom, these residuals are static, bound to the objects beneath them much like a witch's aura, their magical signature. And the workroom looks more or less like it had the last time Hiraya was in here several months ago. There's no strange magic afoot.

Though there's still one more place she hasn't checked.

Neither Hiraya nor her brother go into their parents' room very often anymore. As a child, especially in the weeks and months after their death, Hiraya used to curl up around a pillow on their bed and hug it with all her might, willing it to become them. Sometimes Arawan would join her and they'd hold each other while Arawan told her stories about what they'd been like when Hiraya was a baby: how their mother would laugh and help dress her every time her two-year-old self would fall enamored with their mother's iridescent school regalia. How everyone—including mae*,* who was always moving, just like her and Arawan—would still when their father put down his work for the day and pulled out his samsai. Mae would open all the doors and windows and serve sato infused with pea flowers

into chilled lemongrass or hibiscus tea, then grin as her neighbors' faces lit up while their drinks changed color before their eyes, listening as their father wove stories into the air with his bow.

Her thoughts are wandering. She unlocks the door and opens it.

The room is dark. Darker than the rest of the house, enough that Hiraya releases the ball of light in her hand with a flick of her wrist, sending it back out into the house. The curtains are drawn, the room still as the grave where not even a single thread of her parents' magic remains.

But there is something else.

In the middle of the bed is a folded paper. It's sealed with red wax and a signet crest Hiraya can't make out from here. Around its edges curl smoke-like wisps of magic so dark it seems to absorb light.

She practically rips the wax seal away, barely restraining herself from throwing it against a wall. The smoke curling around her fingers is ice cold against her skin.

Hiraya, it reads.

If you're finding this, I've already gone. I waited as long as I could. But now that I think about it, I actually hope you're too busy acing your finals and showing those stodgy fuckers at the Jin School how lucky they are to have you to worry about anything else at all.

And I can't tell you any more. Please trust me when I say me going like this is the only way to keep you safe. And please, *do* <u>NOT</u> *try to follow me. It isn't safe.*

There's darkness around our family, sister. Mae kept us safe as long as she could.

When you find this, burn the letter, take what's in the vial, and go back to school. I've left the still running for you. Take what you need from the house, everything in it is yours now. And no matter what, no matter how much you're tempted to, <u>*do not*</u> *take off your necklace.*

I love you so much.

—Arawan

For several small eternities, Hiraya just stares at the letter in disbelief as a deep, heavy stone of dread settles in her core. Then the bed tips sideways and Hiraya lands on her shoulder as ice shoots through her blood, chilling Hiraya to the bone. She feels herself shake, feels the linen blanket beneath her grow damp at her temple, hears a hurricane of noise in her head as she tries and fails to process what this means. The fear that's gripped her like a claw.

None of this makes sense. The letter is in her brother's messy hand, sure. But the paper feels strange and has so much dark energy coming off it that Hiraya's hand is numb.

Suddenly, there's flapping in the doorway as her familiar alights on the bed in front of her. The falcon looks at Hiraya, then at the stoppered vial on the bed. When Hiraya follows its gaze, the bird claws once at the vial, turning it over to see the label.

There isn't one. But there doesn't have to be. Hiraya knows exactly what this is.

"*Forgotten Face,*" she barely whispers.

The claws grip into Hiraya's heart and *squeeze.*

In its original form, *Forgotten Face* is a hex. A sinister one, one that affects the memory so you can't remember a certain person. But like all hexes, in its original form, *Forgotten Face* can be removed with Anti-Hex, a universal remedy that is to hexcraft what alkahest is to alchemy: a universal solvent.

Not this, though. Hiraya can tell just by looking at it that the *Forgotten Face* in this vial has been tampered with. Between the tampering and Arawan's letter, Hiraya would bet good money that whatever is in this vial is irreversible.

Hiraya picks it up. What's inside is a gas, not a liquid, and Hiraya watches with narrowed eyes as it swirls around in the vial like the blackest of smoke. She sits up, folding the letter and pocketing it and grabbing the *Forgotten Face,* then gets to her feet, wiping her eyes off on her sleeve as she goes back to the workroom.

The falcon follows. After a beat, her familiar alights on the straps on her shoulders, and Hiraya sees in her peripheral vision that the falcon is staring down at the vial of *Forgotten Face* as though it were about to grow wings and fly away.

Hiraya moves into the room, shuts off the condenser. When it runs dry, she disconnects the long gooseneck pipe, letting what's left of the water evaporate into the room instead of the still. Then she crosses the room and opens the still's collection

chamber, pulling out the small brown bottle of liquid she finds there.

Phoenix oil. Some of the best in the world, possibly the longest-burning combustible that's ever been found. A single drop in kerosene could keep a lantern burning for a week or more. And with her mae's stasis charms stabilizing the collection chamber, it may as well have been distilled yesterday.

She holds the bottle up to the light. It's a little over a third of the way full. Even that is enough to last her years.

But it doesn't bring relief.

Hiraya quickly looks through the storage cabinets for a smaller bottle, one that will protect the delicate oil from the sunlight that would make it decay. When she finds it, she makes a pinching motion in an arc between the mouths of the two bottles, creating a magical siphon like her mother had taught her when she was young to avoid spilling even a single drop.

She puts the oil away in her kit, closes the bag. Closes the still's collection chamber. After a beat, she pulls out Arawan's letter again as she assesses the situation anew.

Arawan is gone. Hiraya doesn't know where he is, doesn't know why he would have left without saying anything. Her first thought had been that Arawan was taken, but the letter is in his own hand and voice, so she quickly rules that out—

Unless a sorcerer has him, Hiraya thinks.

Hiraya pauses on that thought as she looks at it from every angle.

Magic is generation, direction. Directed energy transfer from the user's core into something else. But magic is also fragile, subject to corruption, and cannot be used against another person's will without dire consequences. For the moment a witch uses magic to override another person's will, their magic is permanently altered, resulting in a transformation that is instantaneous, irreversible, and unable to be hidden.

Sorcery is the result of the corruption of a witch's magic. And it is a devil's bargain. While many sorcerers live long lives, the cost is the core of their magic, and the further they stray into the dark, the more of their core it costs them. All young witches are taught from the earliest onset of their magic onward how to guard themselves against an accidental turn, and entire enterprising branches of magic have arisen around the challenge of how to impose one's will without putting themselves at risk.

The more Hiraya looks, the more it's the only thing that makes sense. The amount of dark energy coming off the letter, the *Forgotten Face*—

Hiraya glances to one side, looks at the vial of black smoke. Because *Forgotten Face* is a gas, she can't just throw it out—she's going to have to find a way to dispose of it that won't risk her memory.

She drops her face into her hand. If Arawan thinks Hiraya isn't going to go after him, he's delusional. Of *course Hiraya* is going to go find him. Everything about this situation is so unlike Arawan that the only possible answer is he's been compelled, which makes her next moves as clear as day: find Arawan, get him out, bring him back.

She allows herself a few minutes, though. She looks down at her cord, runs her thumb down the braided leather, holding it to her chest as she lets her eyes fall closed, willing with all her might that she isn't too late.

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Evening turns to night as Hiraya finishes her preparations. Once she's re-packed her kit, she unclips her component bag from her hip and gets to work on figuring out what she'll need from the house.

The truth is, Hiraya has no clue. Without knowing where Arawan is, she has no idea how long it will take to even *get* to him, let alone get him out of wherever he is. By the same token, though, she has no clue when she'll be back, and it's not long at all before the question of what she *needs* from the house becomes more of what she can't live without, should she ever find herself unable to return.

She starts with her mother's spellbooks. There are a few she'd already taken years ago because they'd been useful in her advanced studies, though a few of her professors had turned up their noses at the fact her spellwork was obviously from the lineage of one of their rival schools. This time, though, she takes everything, from household charms to theoretics to the journals she kept with her father, the results of her insistence that her husband write down the mechanical specs constantly flying around in his head.

She takes her father's artificer's toolkit, his book of ratios. A double boiler and several copper basins from the kitchen. As many empty bottles, vials, and other storage containers as she

can fit in an empty shipping box she'd found in one of the cabinets.

She already has a small pot still and various mirrors from school, plus a cooking rig that runs on phoenix oil that she'd picked up in the capitol. No need to bring anything like that from here. But she does take a fine embroidered blanket that her mother had made as a teenager, deep indigo blue with a fiery red-orange phoenix flying up into the stars. Her father's samsai, along with a bow and resin block for maintaining the strings.

A few sets of her own clothes make up the last of it. Then most of her alchemy kit, since with few exceptions, there's actually very little in her kit that she'll need at short notice. And she's about to put the ward back on when her familiar makes a whirring noise and scratches its foot over the countertop, demanding attention.

Hiraya looks up. The two of them end up in a staredown for about five seconds until Hiraya remembers that falcons don't blink.

"*Fine,*" she concedes.

Her familiar wants her to carry her sword. That's what this is about. Hiraya *hates* carrying her sword, and the bird knows it, because it's just so. fucking. pretentious. Her weird rich classmates at her weird rich school all do, and it's—whatever. She doesn't have time to think petty thoughts right now. She grabs her sword—the thing even has a *name*, *Pricha,* Intuition, which is a good name at least—and backsheath, resets the ward on her component bag, and attaches the bag at her hip,

then clips the straps of the backsheath closed across her front and holds out an arm.

“Coming?”

A beat later, her familiar alights on her forearm, then hops up to its preferred perch on her shoulder as they make their way out of the house, Hiraya locking up as they go.

It’s not actually that late yet. The last fingers of twilight are fading out at the edge of the sky. And her friend Astreia’s divination house is probably open by now. It’s about a half hour walk to town from the house, and Hiraya is silent the whole way as she rethinks everything about the letter, trying to make it make sense.

Arawan being compelled is the most obvious answer. But there’s a nagging voice in the back of her mind that has grown increasingly louder the more she’s thought about it: that Arawan may have gone willingly. In which case it’s entirely possible she *will* have to take Arawan back by force.

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Astreia’s house is indeed open when Hiraya arrives. She opens the door to the smell of star anise and bright citrus sweet in the air as it drifts in from the other side of the heavy curtain in Astreia’s waiting area, designed to block sound. Her familiar has flown off to hunt and find somewhere to roost for the night that isn’t in an enclosed space. And the fact Astreia hasn’t greeted her at the door means she’s with a client, so Hiraya unclips her backsheath, stows her sword in her component bag, and takes a seat on the wide ledge beside the space’s only window, propping her back against the wall and running

through alchemical recipes in her head so she doesn't start spiraling with worry.

Sometime later, Hiraya has started to doze a little bit when Astreia rounds the corner. Compared to their school attire, she's dressed simply in loose, pale orange trousers and a cropped blue shirt, the whole look tied together by a translucent shawl she has draped lightly over her head and shoulders and several silver chains around her neck in varying lengths, one of which has the signature 12-pronged astrolabe of Astreia's branch of divination hanging off of it in miniature. She has her ringed hands on her hips.

"I've been wondering why I've been seeing double whenever I've gone looking for something the last couple of days. Get over here!"

Hiraya smiles, then stands and closes the distance between them, sweeping Astreia up in a giant hug that has her off the ground and spinning in a half circle as Astreia laughs and swats at Hiraya's shoulder. She sets her down and she takes a half step back, beaming. "Look at you, you look so regal!"

Hiraya doesn't actually know what to say to that, not least because the reason she's here at all is weighing heavily over her shoulders. But Astreia spares her the need, tugging on her open lapel in an obvious gesture to give her the jacket, so Hiraya shrugs out of it and hands it to her.

"Your friend is outside, I'm guessing?"

"You don't have to guess."

“I know,” Astreia answers, glancing over her shoulder with a wink as she leads Hiraya into her shop. “Common courtesy. Gotta seem normal here, one time stream at a time.”

Astreia says this while she’s walking toward a closet in the corner, while Hiraya takes a seat on her couch and watches her hang up her coat before practically skipping back to her table, where she sits opposite Hiraya in a wide, low-backed chair. She scoots forward and props her elbows on the table, interlacing her fingers, then rests her chin on them, studying Hiraya.

Hiraya resists the urge to fidget as she does this. She sits back further in her seat, crossing her legs.

“You’re *really* troubled,” Astreia says.

Hiraya has known Astreia since their fundamental studies. While their town is big enough that they weren’t childhood friends, they quickly bonded when they both ended up at the Jin School for their specializations, among the only students there from their region, and in the two most difficult programs to be accepted into at that. They had no classes together, but they’d lived together, and Astreia had been a fixture in her life for the four years they’d spent in their programs.

“What gave it away?”

“That line you get on your face,” Astreia answers, tracing a line down the center of her own forehead with a finger. “But mostly the black smoke coming from your pocket. Let’s see it.”

Astreia holds out a hand.

Hiraya glances down, blushes. Sure enough, there are faint black wisps coming out of the front pocket of her trousers.

“I was wondering why my leg was so cold…” Hiraya mutters. She fishes out the letter and hands it to Astreia, keeping the vial. Astreia rolls her eyes.

“You have *got* to work on your situational awareness. How have you survived graduate-level night hunts?”

Hiraya arcs a brow. “My sword?”

Astreia gives an exaggerated huff as she scoots back onto her chair, pulling her feet up on the wide seat. “*Ugh.* I forgot you’re one of *them* now. Let’s see.” She opens the letter. “‘*Hiraya, if you’re finding this, I’ve already gone’—what?* What the fuck is this?”

Astreia stops reading, turns over the letter. It’s still emitting cold black smoke at the edges, but Astreia doesn’t seem concerned about that yet. “You’d have to ask a real charmer to be sure, but I don’t see a second hand—”

“That’s my brother’s handwriting.”

“Right, the hot one you wouldn’t let me bring to Mid-Autumn our first year,” Astreia answers without looking up, making Hiraya blush. “I remember him.”

“Gross—”

She’s back to reading, though, tracing the lines with a finger now. She huffs a laugh at the insult to the Jin School, though her brows are increasingly knitted together in concern. “‘*Please*

trust me when I say me going like this is the only way to keep you safe'—nice try, big bro, we can't protect the littles from everything—"

She reads the rest of it quickly and silently, but Hiraya appreciates her effort at levity nonetheless, considering her insides are currently performing aerial acrobatics.

Astreia is an object reader, a branch of divination that uses physical implements to read the histories of and, to a much lesser extent, tell the fortunes of their owners. Because divination involves manipulation of time, its practice is anchored around some form of present constant so that the diviner doesn't get uprooted while traveling.

"*Shit,*" Astreia says when she reaches the end. "When did you find this?"

"A couple of hours ago."

"It is—" Astreia folds the letter back into quadrants, then winces at the cold as she closes her hand over the folded paper, closing her eyes, "—ow. Three—no, four months old." She sets the letter on the table between them as soon as she gets the reading, bringing her fingers to the back of her neck to warm them. She looks at Hiraya. "So, your brother is missing."

Hiraya was already expecting it. Still, Hiraya closes her eyes and lets her head fall back as she lets a long breath out through her nose. She lingers there for a count of three, then brings a hand to her face.

Astreia lets her have this moment. She of all people knows very well that hearing the truth from someone else makes it real in a way it hasn't been yet. "So it would seem."

"Any leads?"

Hiraya shakes her head. "Worse. He left it with a vial of *Forgotten Face.*"

"*What?!*" Hiraya sits up again at Astreia's near-shout.

Hiraya holds up the vial and sets it on the table between them. "It was with the letter."

Astreia looks at the vial, then back at Hiraya.

"I hope you understand, but I can't touch that if you want me to be of any help in finding him," Astreia warns.

Hiraya nods. And it makes sense. The hex is supposed to make the user forget Arawan, so finding Arawan using the vial would be impossible.

"Did you get anything from the letter?"

"Besides the age and the words? No. It's just—" Astreia makes some kind of hand gesture, "total darkness. Which, there's a few reasons why that could be happening, but all but one of them require a cursebreaker."

"And the one?"

Astreia levels a flat, serious look at Hiraya. "How do you feel about possession?"

Hiraya feels herself blanch, then frown. “Why possession?”

“Because that paper isn’t paper. It’s vellum. And I doubt your brother knew that when he went to write you a letter on someone’s skin.”

Now Hiraya’s blood runs cold. Vellum is a type of paper typically made from finely-stretched animal skin, fine leather that has been cleaned, bleached, stretched, and scraped smooth until it’s suitable for writing.

Suddenly Hiraya feels sick. Astreia is sitting forward in her chair.

“Do you have anything else?”

“Anything he touched recently, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

There’s a long beat. Hiraya threads her fingers through her necklace, tugging at the cord.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you take that off.”

“Because I don’t,” Hiraya answers. “Arawan has one too.”

“Familial charm?”

Hiraya nods.

“What kind?”

“Protection.”

Astreia pulls her feet closer, wrapping a hand around her ankles. “Here’s the thing,” she says.

Then she stops. She isn’t looking at Hiraya anymore, is staring off at a seemingly random point in her shop. Hiraya sees her bite her lip, then release it, apparently steeling herself.

“I can do it, but it’s going to cost you the necklace.”

Hiraya closes her fingers around the cord. “*Why?*”

Astreia is smiling sadly now, the hand not around her ankles toying with the ends of her shoulder-length hair. “Because the cord has been cut. It’s no longer one object. But because they’re linked by the same charm, if you use *Identify,* I can trace where the charm has traveled as long as the *Identify* is active.”

There’s a beat. Then Hiraya leans forward, elbows on her knees as she holds the cord in her fist, letting the implications of this sink in.

Identify is a locator spell, one that’s taught in the upper years of a witch’s fundamental studies, designed to find objects of like kind. Its preparation is simple: using a solvent called *curiosum,* the witch places a piece of whatever they’re trying to find more of in the vial and the *Identify* lights the way to whatever it is they’re looking for, if any can be found.

Hiraya has a vial of *curiosum* in her alchemy kit. The problem is that for the spell to work, the *curiosum* must be allowed to consume whatever is added to it. It is equivalent exchange.

“How much of it do you need?”

Hiraya's voice comes out muffled where she's still bent double. She hears rather than sees Astreia get out of her chair and kneel in front of her, placing a gentle hand at her shoulder.

"He's been gone four months, Hiraya."

Hiraya nods. Another beat, then Hiraya asks, "do you have a knife?"

Astreia stands, then. When she returns, she has a small paring knife she hands Hiraya by the handle.

Hiraya holds the cord taught and slides the knife underneath, carefully cutting it free. It's quiet between them as Hiraya hands the knife back to Astreia, then pulls her kit out from the component bag at her hip, laying it out over the table.

Astreia clears away some trays and cushions that had been there and sets them aside, then lays a hand on Hiraya's forearm.

"I'm going to go lock up. I imagine we'll be here a while."

"Thank you," Hiraya says.

Astreia squeezes her arm, then heads to the front of her shop as Hiraya pulls out her tray of solvents, lifting each by the neck to check the label.

"Azoth, lye, turpentine, *aqua fortis*, *aqua regia*…no…no… *menstruum*…no…*curiosum.* Ah."

"Found it?"

Astreia's voice precedes her as she comes back into the room.

“Yeah.” Hiraya withdraws the vial. The liquid inside it is milky and translucent, shimmering slightly in the low light of Astreia’s shop. She turns to her friend. “Does it matter which one of us does the *Identify?*”

Astreia shakes her head. “No. The magic is in the item, not the caster. If it would be easier if I did it—”

“I can do it,” Hiraya says, gently cutting Astreia off. She nods. “Let’s go to the couch.”

Astreia is a full head shorter than Hiraya. Once she sits, she curls up next to her, resting her head on Hiraya’s shoulder and watching while she uncaps the *curiosum* with the hand holding her necklace. Hiraya hands Astreia the stopper, then slowly, carefully folds the cord over itself until it’s shorter than the length of the vial.

She pauses. She has always worn her necklace short, because her parents’ teal and violet residuals are all over the cord, too, interwoven with Arawan’s deep burgundy and her own pale gold. Threads like spider silk, almost too small to see, delicate and diaphanous in the low light.

Hiraya drops the cord into the vial.

At first, nothing happens. The leather sinks down into the milky liquid, sliding down the sides of the vial. A couple of beats, then the *curiosum* turns slightly sandy in color, then darker, then darker still as the *curiosum* swallows the long ends of the cord, then starts to digest.

A properly brewed, full-strength *curiosum* like this can dissolve a piece of paper or fabric down to nothing in a matter of

seconds. The leather takes a bit longer, long enough that Hiraya's arm starts to hurt from holding her hand up. Once the spell has found everything it's going to find, the *curiosum* goes back to its milky color.

"You ready?" Hiraya asks.

Astreia nods. A few moments later, the liquid in the vial begins to glow. Astreia holds out a hand.

"My turn," she says.

It takes hours. The charm is complicated and hard to follow, and even when Astreia *does* find Arawan along the timeline, there are long periods where the charm disappears from view again and Astreia is left scrambling through, trying to find the next place he appears before the *Identify* runs out. Finally, though—

"*Finally,* he's going somewhere other than the void," Astreia snaps about two hours in. She's sweating at the temples now, restless where she sits, drawing in the air like she's trying to grab something out of it. "Just go to literally *any* other human population, you annoyingly hot jackass—"

Despite everything, Hiraya stifles a laugh. Astreia smiles, her eyes still closed as she traces the timeline, until suddenly she stops.

She sits up. Her smile falls.

"No."

“What?” Hiraya shifts around so she’s facing her. The *Identify* is barely a smoldering candlewick now. “What is it? You found him?!”

Astreia claps a hand over her mouth, opening her eyes.

“Hiraya….” she says through the hand.

Then she hands what’s left of the *Identify* to Hiraya and shoots up, practically flying across the room to one of her bookshelves.

Hiraya watches her skim through the stacks for a few seconds, then draw out a book. Hiraya can’t make out the cover well from the distance, but when Astreia crosses back and sits down with the book on her lap, Hiraya looks down and frowns at the cover.

“*The Emperor of Time*,” Hiraya says, genuinely confused. “That’s a children’s book. How will that help me find Arawan?”

When she looks up, Astreia is already looking at her, face serious.

“Many children’s books are based on true stories, Hiraya, we both know that.” She places the book on her lap. “Have you ever heard of Kham Luk?”

× × × × ×

She stays the night at Astreia’s house. For the first couple of hours, once Astreia has had something to eat and has freshened up a bit, she reopens the shop, resuming her appointments, and Hiraya works on a tentative plan behind the

curtain of her front room as she wraps her head around the unknowns.

This isn't her first time walking blindly into danger. All four of the northern schools require their pupils to undergo a certain number of field training hours per year, a number that increases yearly as they continue their studies. But it *is* her first time walking blindly into a place which, according to the legends, the ancient sorcerer now known as the Dragon of Kham Luk had raised from beneath the sea, having fled the court of Queen Soma of Funan in exile when she'd discovered his true age.

It's not uncommon for powerful magic users to live long lives. But two millennia…?

Hiraya shakes her head to clear it, then looks back at her notebook.

Kham Luk—the Deep Gap—is dangerous. She has to be ready for anything. So, after falling into a fitful sleep on Astreia's couch as she'd eavesdropped on her conversations with other clients, Hiraya had carefully folded the blanket she'd pulled over her at some point during the night and set it on the couch, then clipped on her backsheath. Then, just as carefully, she left the letter she'd written thanking her friend for everything on top of it, one corner weighed down by an obelisk of rainbow tourmaline she was *sure* Astreia didn't have yet.

If the crystal also happened to be in her colors, hopefully that would make up for her lack of a goodbye.

It's unusually cool out when Hiraya slips out of Astreia's shop. The dawn light is still pale. And as soon as she's outside,

Hiraya's familiar acknowledges her from a tree and takes to the skies, probably to hunt again or keep an eye on the marketplace while Hiraya picks up a few things she'll need for the road. Herbal remedies, basic medical supplies, a few tools that hadn't been at the house.

Those errands are quick. The final stop is less so.

There's a charmer in town who is a distributor for wares from the capitol, the kind of things it's otherwise hard to find in the provinces. The charmer looks up from behind the counter as Hiraya walks inside, quickly snatching a little ball of sunlight before the door closes all the way.

It's very dark inside, save the decorative lights placed strategically through the shelves of wares that make their colors seem artificially bright in the dimness. The shop is laid out kind of like a bookstore: charms and hexes grouped by type and use on either side of thick bookcases. There's a prominent display of her own wares near the center as well. From the look of things, her own specialization is in charms of the body.

Hiraya peruses the wares, picking up small bottles around various shelves. *Butterfingers,* which makes the hexed person drop things they're carrying—useful if someone is trying to kill you with a handheld weapon. *Indecisiveness,* which renders the hexed person incapable of making decisions. She puts both of these back, but does pick up a large bottle of Anti-Hex*,* then makes her way to the stand of the shopkeeper's own wares.

They're clever. Hiraya had expected beauty charms, but these are far more interesting. *Silk Feet,* which, according to the information card in front of it, makes the user able to move

soundlessly for up to an hour; *Ears* and *Eyes,* which amplify sound and vision similarly.

When Hiraya turns around, the shopkeeper is standing behind her. Hiraya about jumps out of her skin.

“Sorry, you scared me,” she says.

The shopkeeper just smiles, albeit with a mischievous look in her eyes. She looks like she’s about her age and is nearly her own height, with hair so pale it’s almost white, and something about her is sharp and catlike behind her salesman’s smile.

“Have you found what you need on the floor?”

That question feels loaded somehow. Perceived, Hiraya cuts off her thoughts and sighs.

“Do you have anything…stronger?”

“Both *Eyes* and *Ears* are available in extra strength,” she answers, nodding at the top rung of her display table. But she still has that look on her face. “If you mean the *other* kind of stronger, though, follow me.”

Then she turns and makes her way to the back of the store, clearly expecting Hiraya to follow. Hiraya puts the bottles of *Ears* and *Eyes* back and sets the Anti-Hex on the checkout counter and walks quickly to catch up.

It’s *very* dark back here. The shopkeeper’s magical signature is deep red, and it’s that she follows as she leads her…somewhere. Somewhere that involves at least two doors and a portal, apparently.

The first thing Hiraya notices is that this place is *freezing.* And it's aggressively dark, almost like the mouth of a cave. There's a third door, Hiraya sees—but only because it's somehow *blacker still,* and there are curls of dark energy like the ones that were around Arawan's letter slipping through the seams of the wood.

Hiraya directs her attention forward.

There are two small cases of wares back here, and the shopkeeper keeps step with her as she peruses them, for which Hiraya is thankful. A few of the things here have magical signatures of their own. Hiraya's sunlight is barely enough to illuminate the labels.

Some aren't so bad. One of the least problematic—though still rampant with potential for misuse—among the shelves is *Liquid Courage,* a tonic that enables the user to overcome all inhibitions. It only lasts a few minutes, but those few minutes can be all the difference in the face of a particularly daunting decision. Hiraya picks up a bottle.

Others of them make her skin crawl. *Ashes,* which turns every food into ash in a person's mouth. *Apathy,* which causes complete indifference. *Insomnia* makes a person experience a sudden wave of nausea every time they try to fall asleep. *Foe* makes a person the enemy of everyone around them.

Forgotten Face.

The vial that had been with Arawan's letter practically burns in Hiraya's pocket, and for a long moment, Hiraya just stares blankly at the shelves in front of her, twisting the tube of the

vial in her fingers. After a beat, she pulls it out. The shopkeeper moves in so she can see it better.

When Hiraya holds it up for her, she takes it.

“Well isn’t *that* something,” she says after about half a minute.

Hiraya’s answer is quick, nearly a whisper. “I need to get rid of it.”

“Yes, you do, unless you really *do* want to forget your—” She holds it closer, runs a finger down the side of the vial. “This has to be a family member. Sibling?”

Hiraya had already suspected as much. Hearing it confirmed is like a gut punch. After a few beats, though, she nods.

“Well, I can do *that* for you,” the shopkeeper answers. “This is keyed to you two, so it has no resale value. Give me one sec—and turn away from the door.”

Hiraya does as she’s told, covering her light for good measure. Then she listens for a few silent seconds until the third door unlocks, a procedure that takes three heavy-sounding latches and the loud shriek of old hinges. But then she hears the sounds of wind and breaking glass before the door slams shut again as the shopkeeper re-locks the door, then returns to Hiraya.

There’s another bottle in Hiraya’s hand, now. It’s deep grey in the darkness, reflecting her sunlight like a mirror. There had been only one on the shelf.

Magic suppressant – XY, Unbreakable

Hiraya puts the *Liquid Courage* back.

The shopkeeper's smile is softer this time. Knowing. And she doesn't say anything else, just leads Hiraya back out into the storefront.

As Hiraya walks out with her wares, she sees her familiar watching the shop door from a rooftop across the street, and the falcon alights on her shoulder without Hiraya calling it down as she starts walking home without thinking, only to stop abruptly when she realizes what she's doing.

The town is awake now. The street is full of people going to and from the market. A few of them look twice at Hiraya—a few in suspicion, at least a couple in recognition.

And Kham Luk is in the opposite direction.

Hiraya sighs. A beat later, she draws her sword, opens a portal with two clean strokes, sheaths *Pricha* at her back, then steps through the hole and vanishes.

× × × × ×

She lands at the harbor. It's as far as she can safely go, having never been anywhere close to Kham Luk. Vanishing without a concrete destination in mind is a good way to get *quite literally* split in two, or worse.

So they go by boat. Hiraya books passage on a schooner heading south, a four-day journey in which her familiar thoroughly charms the crew, catching fish for the ones it likes and giving sass to the ones it doesn't. For some reason, this lends Hiraya an air of authority she doesn't understand, but she

hears chattering about how well she's trained her familiar and fights the urge to laugh at the notion she's *trained* her familiar at all.

The bird takes to the skies the moment they arrive at the dock. While the crew are occupied, Hiraya quickly scouts around for a landing place and vanishes before the gangway is fully lowered, reappearing in the shadow of a storefront at the other end of the street.

It's quick from there. While the falcon scouts ahead for a vanishing point, Hiraya finds an inn, booking a room so she can wash up after four days at sea and sort through her provisions in relative safety. And when her familiar lets her know that it's returning, Hiraya quickly packs up again, checks her pockets, and leaves the flawless gold coin she spent the last four days transmutating from a lead pellet by hand on the untouched pillow, then draws her sword.

At first, Hiraya doesn't quite understand what she's seeing. She'd seen it from the falcon's eyes, this straight, dry road leading to nothing. Somehow it's even more desolate from the ground. And Hiraya is alone as she walks toward that nothing, following the bird as it flies along the edge of the barren plateau, then out onto it.

And then Hiraya is no longer alone.

The person is probably 50 meters ahead of her. Far enough to be beyond the tree cover, too far away for Hiraya to see their face. But not too far for her familiar to see their face—so for the span of two heartbeats, Hiraya sees through the falcon's eyes as it stares down the figure on the path from its perch on Hiraya's shoulder.

“Arawan,” Hiraya says under her breath.

The wind stirs. She’s close enough to the edge of the tree cover now that it’s like waves against a cliff, eddying and pulling at Hiraya, the only solid object in its midst, trying to draw her out to sea. She hears the falcon’s talons tighten around the leather trim of her jacket.

Hiraya stares at Arawan like a specter. He’s dressed entirely in black, in a *hunting jacket* of all things despite the furious heat of the sun. The shirt he’s wearing is open to below his sternum, far enough that Hiraya can make out the phoenix pendant that weighs down the leather cord around his neck.

“Turn back, Hiraya.”

His voice doesn’t carry. Or it doesn’t seem to. Arawan hasn’t moved, but the sound is so close that he might as well be standing within arm’s reach.

“What—”

“Turn *back,* Hiraya. I told you not to follow me.”

Surprise turns instantly to fury.

“What are you *talking* about—did you seriously leave me that letter thinking I wouldn’t come after you?!”

“Hiraya—”

“What the fuck *is* this, Hia?!” Hiraya practically rips the letter from her pocket, holding it up like Arawan can possibly tell what it is from this distance. But the next second, Arawan is at

her side, staring at the letter in Hiraya's hand as its cold tendrils of black slip through her fingers and dissipate on the wind.

"I told you to burn it," Arawan says.

It's nearly a whisper. Grieved, like he's been *wronged* somehow. Hiraya's whole body alights with anger at the audacity, so much that her sword hums in its sheath enough that Hiraya feels it down her back, buzzing like a swarm of bees.

"You also told me to hex myself so I'd forget you as though you thought I'd actually do it."

Arawan flinches. A long beat falls. The wind whistles through it, but neither of them breathe.

Then Arawan's face changes.

There's a change in the air, too. Like it's charged—not just that, but like lightning has struck the ground, leaving even the dust scarred and singed. She smells ozone, feels the hair on her neck and arms stand on end. It hasn't rained in days, and there are no clouds in the sky, but she feels a storm.

The next beat, it comes.

With the violent displacement of a rip, the sky goes typhoon grey, the clouds that were nowhere before swirling above in an angry, roiling spiral. And as the wind becomes violent enough to strip the leaves off the trees at the mouth of the plateau, Hiraya reaches instinctively behind her to shield her familiar only to find it already tucked into Hiraya's downwind shoulder, talons wrapped around the backsheath.

Hiraya squints into the wind as a mask of cold anger settles over her brother's face. *Pricha* is humming so loud now the sound can be heard over the wind, restless in the presence of this much magic, which, of course—this is it, *this* is the danger of Kham Luk.

They have to go. Now.

"Hia*,* whatever this is, *stop it* and come home, we can sort this out later—!"

Arawan looks back at Hiraya like a stranger, unblinking. His eyes are night black.

No.

Panic, blue-grey and visceral like a sudden wave.

"Hia*, please* tell me you didn't—"

"Don't make me compel you, Hiraya."

The same cruel talons that had gripped her in their parents' bedroom tear through Hiraya's gut anew as she watches the jagged black marks creep around the side of Arawan's neck. But somehow, even despite what this means—the total, irrevocable, *irreversible* corruption of Arawan's magic that this means—they're nothing compared to the dread that follows, cold as the grave, when Hiraya looks past Arawan to find a great black wolf emerge from the trees not twenty meters behind him.

The creature is like nothing Hiraya has ever seen before. In her time at school in the north, Hiraya has encountered all manner

of demon, spirit, ghoul, and ghost on the Jin School's mandatory night hunts, some of which have brought her close to death. But this creature is the size of a *horse,* lips just barely pulled back around teeth no doubt the length of Hiraya's hand, a black void of resentfulness so powerful its own body can't contain it. Wisps of the same darkness that is coming off the letter Hiraya is still holding flare from the creature's body like black flames, whipping and dissipating in the force of the wind the creature walks through like still air, its eyes locked on Hiraya and her brother.

The creature stalks toward them. Hiraya drops the letter. Her sword *screams,* begging to be drawn as the letter rips away on the wind and toward the plateau.

Hiraya reaches into her pocket.

She finds the bottle she's looking for easily. She draws it out—the liquid inside is quicksilver grey, like a more liquid form of mercury. Hiraya uncorks it with her teeth and tosses the cork aside.

In a way, Hiraya had prepared for this. The possibility that she would find Arawan turned was why she'd bought the magic suppressant in the first place. But even now, amidst the numbness and the dread she still feels over her fear proving founded, it's secondary as the instinct Hiraya hoped she'd never have to rely on takes over.

The creature is magical. She has a magic suppressant.

She just hopes it will be enough.

"Hia, don't move."

The wolf starts growling. It drops into an offensive posture, low to the ground, clearly prepared to strike.

Hiraya draws her sword.

The wolf attacks.

It makes for Hiraya first. In one single leap, it closes the distance between them, and Hiraya barely whirls away in time to avoid the creature snap its jaws closed around the air where Hiraya's shoulder just was. It pivots on its feet, claws digging into the dust, and turns into the fierce wind to which it is evidently *immune*, making for Hiraya a second time.

Hiraya is not a swordsman. She has a sword because every advanced student at the Jin School has a sword, and her relationship with *Pricha* has always been a sort of grudging partnership on her end, something like unrequited love on the sword's. But Hiraya feels it guide her hand as in the span of her next heartbeat, she turns her wrist and strikes up with the long blade, cutting the creature across its face just above its right eye in the same moment she hurls the contents of the vial at the creature's side.

It's not a good hit. It's barely a scratch on a being this powerful, though Hiraya sees little rivulets of black blood drip off the point of her sword onto the dust below. Still, the creature *howls,* a sound more terrible than a ship crashing to pieces against a cliff as the wind stills, the curls of resentful energy dissipate, and Hiraya finds himself face-to-face with a man gripping her throat in a vice, choking the breath out of Hiraya and still snarling like the wolf he just was as void-black eyes spear into Hiraya's and a cracked, barely-human voice demands:

“*Remove it.”*

CHAPTER TWO

The sorcerer manages to keep his hand around Hiraya's neck for all of two seconds before Arawan rips him away and decks him square in the jaw, hard enough that the sorcerer staggers back a couple of paces. In a flash, though, he's snarling again, reaching for Arawan this time—

But before he can reach, Arawan's hand closes around Hiraya's wrist and next thing she knows, Hiraya is standing in a pale stone hallway and Arawan is hauling her through a set of double doors, so furious he's practically giving off smoke.

"*Dammit, Hiraya*, I told you not to take off your necklace—!"

Hiraya rips her hand free from Arawan's grip, whirling on her brother just inside the doorway, before the door can even fully close. She's still buzzing with adrenaline from the fight, still feels like she's standing on a wet floor during a thunderstorm. "How the fuck did you even know?"

"How did I know? Oh, I don't know—how could I *possibly* have known that you did the *one thing* I told you not to do when my necklace suddenly starts glowing like a fucking *star* in the middle of the night?!"

A sudden cold runs through Hiraya as the fight goes out of her like a snuffed candlewick.

Of course. The *Identify. Identify* finds objects of like kind. And he would have known immediately that it was Hiraya who'd done it, because only a member of their family can remove the necklace.

Hiraya wants to slap herself. But she's angry, now, so she doesn't.

"You cannot *possibly* have thought I wouldn't come after you," Hiraya grounds out, practically through gritted teeth.

"I *told* you, Hiraya, it's not safe—"

Hiraya feels eyes on her, then. She looks over Arawan's shoulder. There's a man sitting at a café table posed between the two windows, one hand resting around a shallow glass of reddish spirits.

"You," Hiraya says.

She's stopped in her tracks barely two paces into the room, just far enough away for Arawan to close the door behind them, and before Hiraya can say or do anything else the man is out of his seat and closing the distance between them.

"Me," Ulan answers.

There's a tailored brocade jacket in the northern style over the back of the chair Ulan had just been sitting in, similar to the one Hiraya is currently wearing. Ulan has always dressed that way when visiting them, though anyone can tell by looking at him that he's not from there. Now, he's down to a deep-cut, storm-grey silk shirt that's open to mid-sternum, its laces still undone, revealing jagged black marks that look like lightning trailing over his shoulders from the back of his neck.

"I *knew* I shouldn't trust you. Arawan was always so *cagey* about you—"

At a look from Arawan, Hiraya cuts herself off with a sigh. She's angry, and Arawan's longtime partner and their one-time savior upon their parents' death hasn't actually done anything to warrant Hiraya's wrath.

Or has he—?

"You may ask your questions, Hiraya."

Hiraya flinches at the sound of her name out of Ulan's mouth. Even now. Ulan has known her since she was still in her fundamental studies, long before she'd ever gone to the Jin School. He'd been a fixture in her and Arawan's lives.

In this moment, in this place—this foreign, yet strdeary intimate place overlooking the sea, where Hiraya can see what she suddenly knows to be Ulan and Arawan's unmade bed in the next room through the reflection of the mirror on the adjacent wall—the man who had been their benefactor for years is a stranger.

He'd entered their lives not long after their parents' death. Arawan had long since learned the process of distilling phoenix oil from their father, and after a period of mourning and then another period of sorting through the family business records and correspondence to find which orders were still outstanding, Arawan had taken over production in the hope it would provide a means for the two of them to live, like it always had.

In the wake of their father's death, many of the family's buyers had disappeared. Ulan didn't, though. He came every month for his order in person, like he always had, and it wasn't uncommon for Hiraya to come home from school on delivery

days to find him and Arawan having dinner together at the dining room table, or smoking in the garden while Arawan carefully milled the phoenix bones that would form the oil's primary distillate.

Hiraya wasn't clueless. Arawan had never *named* whatever it was between him and Ulan, but as Hiraya had gotten older, she'd gotten used to Arawan sometimes not being there when she came home from a break in her studies once she'd been accepted into the Alchemy track at the Jin School. She even suspected she knew who was really paying her tuition fees. And she'd graciously never said anything, because while Arawan had never said anything either, Arawan was happy. And things were good.

Until they weren't.

"How long was the last buyer's contract?" Hiraya asks.

A buyer's contract is something a seller buys from a buyer as a guarantee the buyer will continue to purchase from them, ensuring the seller has that continued revenue stream. Hiraya feels more than sees Arawan flinch at her side at her rudeness, but Ulan answers immediately.

"Seven years."

"And what was the price?"

"Hiraya—" Arawan interjects.

Or starts to. Hiraya cuts him off. "I'm asking po, Hia. *What was the price?!*"

Ulan sighs. The expression in his eyes is a little defeated, which, despite everything, is satisfying.

“Is it not obvious?”

“*Ulan—*”

“I want you to say it,” Hiraya quips back.

“I asked him to turn,” Ulan says quietly.

“*Why?!*” Hiraya has turned to Arawan, now, her desperation and confusion breaking through now. “What reason could you *possibly* have to *turn* and then *send me away—*”

“It’s not *safe,* Hiraya!” Arawan yells.

Arawan’s voice echoes in the room. His hands are clenched at his sides, his face raw with frustration and fury.

“Why,” Hiraya demands.

It comes out a statement. Arawan waves his hands in an oblique gesture as though Hiraya can follow what he’s saying. A beat later, he looks at Ulan.

Ulan looks back. The two of them have an entire nonverbal conversation in the span of about ten seconds, and then Ulan says, “because he cannot protect you alone.”

Ulan’s deep black gaze lands on Hiraya, then. Hiraya feels pressure, suddenly, like she’s just been cold called in class on a day she didn’t do the reading.

“You may ask your questions, Hiraya,” Ulan says again.

Hiraya meets his eyes. “Why would you?”

“Because I love him.”

Hiraya’s brows cross. “*Why?*” she repeats.

“Hey—” Arawan quips. Neither of them engage.

“Why does anyone love?” Ulan answers.

Silence.

Hiraya has no answer for that. Ulan knows it, but he doesn’t linger on the subject either, because this conversation isn’t a game.

“We’ve thread-bonded,” Arawan says.

His voice is quiet. He’s blushing a bit, not looking at Hiraya or at Ulan. As if attuned to his distress—which he *is,* if this is true—Ulan turns to him. “Love—”

“No,” Arawan says, looking at Ulan now. “Without the charm, it isn’t—” Arawan looks at Hiraya, then at Ulan again, expression now as much frustration as concern. “She’s going to need protection now. She should know why.”

Ulan sighs. “Right,” he says under his breath.

The room goes quiet, then. Both Ulan and Arawan are watching him now a bit like parents waiting for their young child to catch up. But Hiraya can’t even be upset about it, not when just what they’ve said so far is enough to tip Hiraya’s entire world on its axis.

Immediately some things make sense, like why Arawan had been able to wield a stunning amount of magic Hiraya had never seen him use on the plateau. When magic users thread-bond, they become irrevocably linked; what belongs to one belongs to the other, and they share their magic, their power, even their life force. If one dies, so does the other. Even their memories become linked.

Far beyond marriage, thread-bonding is so absolute a union that it is very rarely done. And when it *does* happen, it's far more common between sets of siblings like twins or triplets than between romantic partners.

"Why?" Hiraya asks a third time.

His voice is quiet now. His mind is reeling. Again, Ulan and Arawan share a look that's an entire conversation—because it very likely *is.*

"I'll leave that decision to you," Ulan says to Arawan aloud.

Arawan lets out a long breath, one that makes the entire top of his body sag like a bag of rice that's been set down on the floor. He murmurs something under his breath that Hiraya can't hear, but which makes Ulan smile, and Hiraya's temper flares again.

"Hia."

"Yes," Arawan says without context, and it takes a beat for Hiraya to realize Arawan is talking to Ulan again rather than her. "Come with us. I'm not sure I can get the door open on my own."

And then Arawan takes Hiraya's hand and vanishes them both to a long stone hallway that looks to be underground, empty but for a dozen or so massive, ornate doors.

The one they're in front of is nearest a long staircase, and there's enough light coming from the top end of it that Hiraya suspects it's probably the main floor of the house. Arawan is facing the door, his hands at chest height about a hand's breadth apart.

"Breathe," Ulan says to Arawan, voice low. "Call it on the inhale, direct it on the exhale."

Arawan nods. His expression is dour, frowning in concentration as he pauses, then inhales slowly, staring straight ahead as a ball of dark energy collects between his palms.

Hiraya's eyes fly open. Arawan exhales, directing the darkness into the sun-shaped ornament in the center of the door for the length of his breath, then lowers his hands.

"Good," Ulan says, still to Arawan.

Increasingly Hiraya is starting to feel like she is intruding on their private world. Arawan scoffs. "That was probably 80% you."

"Call it insurance. I don't want to keep Hiraya waiting."

"I'm right here," Hiraya says.

Arawan's shoulders tense. "I know," he says, this time to Hiraya.

The doors open. There's a threshold of darkness, then the sound of wind and the feel of her stomach dropping like she's falling through the air, and then—

Light.

So much light. Floor-to-ceiling windows that look out into a vibrant garden in full bloom under a happy blue sky. To one side, there are sets of easels leaning against a wall near a slew of blank canvasses. Hiraya can see the edge of a canvas that has been set up from around the corner to the next room. To the other side is a short hallway that leads to what looks like a bedroom at one end, probably a washroom next to it.

It looks like a room in a guesthouse. Comfortable, despite the unfinished tile floors, but devoid of almost anything personal. Despite the canvasses, there is no art on the walls.

Hiraya is about to move further into the room when Arawan stops her with a hand at her shoulder. "Before you go in there—Hiraya…I didn't know. I haven't known much longer than you have."

"Hia—"

Arawan holds out a hand, expectant. After a beat, Hiraya takes it, then lets Arawan lead her further in.

There's a moment, a long, indiscernible expanse of time where between the span of two heartbeats, Hiraya's world, already tipped on its axis, falls over completely. Because one beat, her mother was dead, and the next she was sitting at the edge of a chair in front of one of the mounted canvasses, paintbrush in hand as she painted the flowers in the garden.

She drops Arawan's hand. Both hands fly to her mouth.

She's wearing a set of gauzy lavender robes, the sleeves of which have been rolled back to the elbows. Her hair is down, fluttering a bit as the breeze from the open window she's facing wisps into the room. She doesn't turn.

"Mae."

Her hand stills. She still doesn't turn.

"Hiraya," Arawan says, his tone like a warning.

But the next thing Hiraya knows, she's across the room, the shoulders of her *physical*, *living* body in her hands as she turns his mother from the canvas to look at her.

It's all wrong. *It's all wrong*. The mae he'd known had been strong, her body wiry but powerful like Arawan's from when it had been her who ground phoenix bones in the garden, then carried her children on her hip until they were eight or nine while she cooked for their sick or elderly neighbors. Her who'd climbed under the house or onto the roof to charm repairs when the house needed them. She's always had artist's hands, but they were strong and sure, and she carried herself with poise and grace, like—

Not like this, Hiraya thinks. Her body turns too easily when Hiraya moves her, loose and pliant as a doll's. Her eyes are wide and confused but completely devoid of recognition as her hold on her paint tray slips enough so that some of the pigments slide off onto her robes. She looks down at this and a little worry line appears between her brows, and she looks

more distressed about the lost paints than about being manhandled by her daughter.

"*Mae,*" Hiraya begs.

"Hiraya."

This time it's Ulan she hears warn her from the other side of the room, and Hiraya barely manages to restrain herself from turning around and snapping back at Ulan for the *nerve* of telling her how to approach her mother. "How are you alive?!"

Her voice cracks on the question. Tears have welled up so fast she's nearly choking on the effort to hold them back. And when she *still* doesn't answer, just blinks at the mess on her lap and then up at Hiraya, her face innocent and unquestioning as an infant's, Hiraya turns, not releasing her shoulders, and all but shouts at Ulan and Arawan:

"*Why won't she answer?!"*

"She can't. She's lost her memory," Ulan answers.

She makes the smallest sound, the faintest, most hollow sound of surprise, and Hiraya lets go of her shoulders like they're hot coals and backpedals a step, watching in horror as she rights herself and turns back to her canvas with no further acknowledgement.

Hiraya sinks to the floor, her head in her hands. Her body is shaking. She hears a single dry sob, feels like her body has turned to fulminating silver—if anyone were to touch her, she'd explode.

The dam breaks. She holds herself tight as the fierce current of anger and grief washes over her, tears streaming down her face. Her body burns from the inside, practically seizing as she tries to keep herself from just collapsing into broken sobs on the floor of this strange room between her sorcerer brother, their benefactor, and the near-lifeless shadow of a person occupying their mother's body as her mind screams, a single thought ricocheting around her mind:

Where did it all go wrong?!

She's not sure how long she stays there. Long enough that her knees ache, as do her hands where they're balled up into fists in the fabric of her jacket. Her head feels like it's wrapped in a ring of burning sandpaper, her face like an overfilled balloon.

"You see now why I can't leave?" Arawan asks once Hiraya sits up again.

Hiraya doesn't answer. She dips her fingers into her component bag and pulls out her medical kit, grabbing a length of gauze off the roll of it so she can blow her nose. If she had the mental energy right now, she'd transmute it clean again, but she doesn't, so instead she pulls her flint from inside her jacket and ignites it at a corner, then stands, leaving the cloth to burn on the stone tiles as she turns and faces her brother and Ulan.

There's a trill from the doorway, then the sound of flapping wings as Hiraya's familiar flies into the room, alighting on one of the easels propped against the wall. For the span of a second or two, Hiraya sees the falcon's vantage of the burning cloth on the ground, then her own face before her eyes blink back normal.

In the absurdity of all this, the bird's judgment of her nearly makes Hiraya laugh. A beat later, though, there's the sound of wind next to her and Hiraya sees Ulan flick his hand as though unscrewing a jar and the fire beside Hiraya goes out.

Hiraya's familiar relocates to her shoulder. The movement draws her mother's attention and Hiraya sees what almost looks like joy overtake her face as she looks at her familiar where it sits.

It takes Hiraya a long beat to realize that his mother had never met the falcon before. Her familiar has been with her nearly eight years—which was, until today, two less than her mother had been dead.

"Is she safe here?" Hiraya asks.

Because that's her first question. Not *why,* not *how.* And she has so many others—half a lifetime's worth, really, all at once. "If all this is going to be worth it, is she at *least* safe?!"

"Yes," Ulan says. "Only a member of my family can open that door."

Which includes Arawan, now, because of the thread-bond. "But not me," Hiraya bites out, plowing through without allowing either of them time to answer. "Great. Next question. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess the *forces in your family that Mae was trying to protect us against* are the reasons she's here at all. How the *fuck* do you expect me to believe she's safe here?!"

Her voice is raw. Her eyes burn. She's been shouting, the red-hot scourge of her grief now turned fully to anger, and when she stops the room goes heavily, palpably silent.

"He was stripped of his birthright," says a new voice from the door, "when he betrayed our family and tried to take your mother against her will."

"Pa," Ulan says quietly.

The Dragon of Kham Luk is not the man Hiraya expected him to be, at least not in physical appearance. Suhat is of average height with a round, weathered face, and he's dressed similarly to Hiraya in a high-collared black jacket trimmed in platinum grey. He leans the slightest bit against the doorframe he's standing in, one hand in his pocket.

"But he's still dangerous?" Hiraya asks.

He nods once. "My brother can no longer summon darkness, but he is still a powerful sorcerer."

"Where is he?"

Pause. Just a beat, but enough to make Hiraya feel scrutinized despite the fact she's the one asking the questions.

"We don't know."

Lie.

It's her familiar who is the better between them at spotting untruth when presented to its face. Hiraya hasn't yet cured herself of her instinct to assume good, or at least neutral, intentions until presented with evidence to the contrary—and

if she's being honest with herself, she doesn't want to. Having her familiar gives her the luxury of being an optimist.

The Dragon's weighty presence threatens to cure it by force. Hiraya follows his gaze as he watches as her mother continues to paint as though the past half hour had never occurred. Her paints have even been restored to her paint tray, her robes cleared of the stain.

Hiraya follows his mother's gaze into the garden, then. Watches with childlike wonder as the flowers in front of the window change to match the flowers she's painting.

"How fortunate that you've joined us when you have, Hiraya," Ulan's father says. "One might almost call it fate."

CHAPTER THREE

Roshan is standing in front of a locked door in a long stone hallway beneath the main floor of the house. In it are nearly a dozen other doors just like this one, about a third of which are occupied. Behind this particular door is a mercenary from an island nation far to the north and east, one whose purposes Roshan had not yet ascertained. That very *mystery* was why he needed to get behind this door.

The door is made of interlocking metal and fossilized wood and is twice as high as Roshan is tall. It has no handle and no hinges, and neither light nor sound can escape it. It can, in fact, only be opened by magic—by summoning. By a specific *kind* of summoning that only a member of his bloodline has ever been able to perform.

The receptacle is shaped like the sun. When it's operating properly, it's the sun in eclipse, dark magic that collects in its golden core and spreads out into the magical mechanisms of the door's interior, allowing it to slide apart from the center. A lot of theater for what are ultimately dungeon doors, but Ulan had commissioned them from an artificer a few centuries ago and for better or worse, fewer than ever have dared cross the plateau since they were installed. There are precious few things that serve as better insurance than reputation.

Roshan holds both hands in front of his chest about a hand's breadth apart, as though to summon darkness. But rather than the feeling he expects of cool water emanating from his core, up his shoulders, and down through his arms, Roshan feels only the burn of muscle engagement as his muscles tense and his fingers curl into claws and a beat later, he's slamming a hand

on the door with a frustrated shout, the shock of striking metal with his bare palm rocketing back up his arm, leaving his palm stinging and his arm numb.

He leaves it there. He leaves his arm against the door where he'd struck it as the shock and stinging dissipate and his blood settles into its normal rhythms. His heart rate slows as he takes a long breath, then another.

"Need me to get that for you?"

Roshan whips free from the door and hurls his arm as though to slice his cousin in half with the cut, a blade of pure darkness sharper than any sword ever made. Nothing follows but air.

"I see your father wasn't kidding," Pelamo says.

No, he wasn't, Roshan thinks, as though his acerbic thoughts could burn Pelamo where his now-absent magic could not. Because that's *precisely the problem*—it's gone. Suppressed. Whatever.

"No."

Pelamo laughs, clapping Roshan over the shoulder. "That's rough, buddy."

Roshan reaches for his cousin's wrist, fully intending to break it.

"I will *kill you—!*"

But Pelamo is already gone.

Roshan swears and pounds his fist against the dungeon door again. A beat later, once the shock wave has once again dissipated, he turns and makes for the stairs.

Under ordinary circumstances, he'd vanish himself back to his chambers like Pelamo had done. But this of course is one more of the hundred thousand inequities Roshan has borne since he'd realized what Arawan's little *bitch* of a sister had done to him at the end of the road. No vanishing, no summoning, sure. *Magic suppressant,* his father had said. But the little things: his limited senses. Being bound to one form. Not being able to heal the cut over his eye. Having to *pick up* every individual thing he wanted to carry. He couldn't even *compel,* for fuck's sake. Every stupid *fucking* thing that happened to his body, he *felt,* and there was no way around it—no outlet. He'd wanted to scream.

He still does. He fights the urge as he storms up the stairs to the main floor of the house, ignoring Sarimanoc's smug smirk where he's curled up with his mayura in the rafters, the bird's long white tailfeathers draping elegantly off one side of the webbed hammock his brother has spun between two crossbeams off one side of the staircase, one Roshan again climbs by *foot.*

He's a *storm* of fury by the time he reaches his wing of the house. He needs to blow steam, and he's already mentally choosing a weapon to swing around when he shoulders the still-open door to his training room open enough to admit him only to find a sight that instantly sets his blood boiling.

Roshan's training room is a long stone hallway not unlike the one he's just come from downstairs. It, too, is cut into the rock

from which the house has been carved, lit primarily by torchlight, its only windows mere slits near the ceiling. Somehow, it's bright as daylight in here now.

"Get out of my armory," Roshan demands.

The alchemist glances back over her shoulder. She has her back to Roshan, truly astonishing evidence of a lack of self-preservation, all the more because she then turns back forward without further acknowledgement, apparently going back to whatever she was doing.

This is not unexpected. The alchemist has been brought to his wing under his father's direct orders, which he'd conveyed to Roshan over a game of makruk less than an hour ago. The disarming way in which his father always conducts his business.

"She is the one who cursed you," his father had said like it wasn't obvious, moving his boat two squares to the left. Roshan had eyed the boat warily, all the more on his father's next words, a response to Roshan's silence. "She is not only the one who cursed you, She is also the most likely to know how to reverse it because of her training."

Roshan had sneered at this. "I never knew you had such high esteem for the schools."

The four cultivation schools in the north aren't the only formal establishments of magic on the continent, but they are the most highly renowned. That was the extent of Roshan's concern for them.

"On the contrary, Roshan." His father had fixed him with a look, then, one Roshan felt in his forehead and temples as the

demand to make his play that it was. He'd moved his horse to intercept the boat, feeling a chill at the small upturn of his father's mouth that followed. A tell he'd freely given. "It's important to keep up with the times."

Then he'd moved his nobleman and penned Roshan, and Roshan felt his teeth bare as his father declared, "*Rukhat.*"

Of course he had. Roshan knew his orders just as well as he knew he couldn't hide from the Dragon of Kham Luk in the span of a dozen lifetimes. Even if he could, his father would always be another dozen ahead of him.

The girl—young woman, whatever, she can't be older than 40 or 50, though admittedly Roshan has forgotten whether witches age quickly or not—has made quick work of the space. Someone has brought in a set of heavy desks and both a chair and a pair of stools, one of which is propped up on several thick books for some reason. There's a set of blank folding screens that are clearly designed to have things pinned to them, though there is only one diagram currently mounted, and a component bag by one corner of the desk. It can't be larger than Roshan's fist, but there is a small stack of copper basins poking out of the mouth of it. The light is coming from a clear glass receptacle set on one of the desks, the one the alchemist isn't using.

Several beats pass before the alchemist sets something down on the desk in front of her. Which is *quite* a piece, truth be told, dark, heavy hardwood already covered in an array of equipment and several racks of substances in tubes, bottles, and jars. They have labels written in the northern script Roshan has had no need for in centuries, and he struggles to read them as he steps into the alchemist's work area.

The alchemist goes immediately tense. Her posture locks up and she stills her hands on the table, fingers curling around the lip of the desk.

Then there's an ear-splitting *shriek* from somewhere to Roshan's right, and at the sudden sound of wings he looks up to find a small *raptor* of all things perched atop one of the screens, staring Roshan down like a—well.

The bird clicks. Roshan hears feathers ruffle and talons dig into the frame of one of the screens, and the alchemist laughs quietly, though none of the tension leaves her.

"Falcons and hawks are not the same thing."

The alchemist's voice is warm, melodic. She's not very good at sounding cold and disinterested, especially not on the heels of a laugh that sounds like what Roshan remembers of the first warm sunlight after a storm.

"What the fuck is this."

Roshan's demand comes out a statement. The alchemist finally turns a bit, just enough to look over her shoulder.

"I figured it would be best to work in a space that can withstand explosion, since I'm captive here until I break your curse."

Roshan flinches. Something in his chest tugs painfully. He shoves it down before speaking again.

"It's very presumptive of you to invade my space."

The alchemist turns back around, reaching for something else on her workstation. “I was told your father knew about this.”

Roshan closes in further as a second crack of anger ignites in him, this time at his father’s outmaneuvering of him for the second time in as many hours.

“Anything *else* you were told?” Roshan snarls.

The alchemist goes still again, looks back over her shoulder. Roshan sees her take a breath. “I was told you’d react like this and not to show you my face.”

“By whom?”

“Sarimanoc.”

Roshan groans angrily under his breath. The bird chirrups and Roshan’s head whips around to face it.

“Is there anything you *don’t* know?”

Roshan hears the sound of something being mixed in a bowl and then set down. When Roshan looks at the alchemist this time, she’s facing him.

“Yes. I don’t know who you are.”

“Yet you’re showing me your face,” Roshan quips.

“Not that face.”

The alchemist holds Roshan’s gaze, unblinking. She must get that from the falcon.

She really did talk to Sarimanoc, Roshan thinks, ignoring the bird as it clicks at him again.

Still, the alchemist looks away first. She's leaning against the lip of the desk now, looking down at her foot as she stretches out the top of her arch. She has nice legs.

"I'll go first. I'm Hiraya. I'm—"

"Arawan's sister," Roshan interrupts.

It's the most charitable thing Roshan could have said. Nevertheless, the alchemist—*Hiraya*—looks up at Roshan with indignance. "—a mastery candidate in Alchemy at the Jin School," she continues, slower now. Acerbic.

Cute. Her attire must indicate that somehow. It's a lot of pale gold and cream, though her brocade silk jacket is more green than gold in this light. It makes her skin look darker. Warmer, maybe.

A few more beats of silence fall. This time the alchemist doesn't look away—she's still leaning a bit against the desk, though now she's looking up through thick eyelashes that make her eyes look absolutely *enormous* and—

"If I'm being made to share my quarters with you, I should get something out of this," Roshan says without thinking.

"Besides the cursebreak?"

Roshan's mouth curls up on one side. "That is my entitlement. I mean the favor of not making you work from the dungeons."

Hiraya blanches. Roshan sees her flinch, the first time she's shown fear.

The bird squawks. Instinctively, Roshan waves a hand as though to strike it down with the cut—when, again, nothing follows but air, Hiraya seems momentarily amused until Roshan crowds her into the desk, caging her in.

"I know a hundred different ways to kill you with my bare hands where you stand," Roshan growls, low and dangerous.

Hiraya is taller than she looks. It's hard to look down at a person his own height. Roshan closes in further, until Hiraya is leaning back over the desk to put distance between them.

"Then do it. If the hex was linked to me you'll never get it off."

Her voice is breathy like this, like she's just run up a flight of stairs. "You don't sound like a girl afraid to die."

Hiraya's features twist in a scowl. "Of course I am. But if you were the type to gamble on what that means for the curse, you'd have already killed me."

Roshan has nothing to say to that. He steps back enough to let Hiraya stand and straighten herself, nearly hissing her honorific.

"Disobedient young *master*, aren't you."

"I can't disobey you if I'm not yours to command."

Hiraya meets Roshan's eyes. Her are a warm, deep brown, and when Roshan feels something hot flood through his chest he again speaks without thinking.

“Do you want your brother back or not?”

Hiraya’s eyes narrow. “Don’t hold Arawan over me.”

Roshan closes the distance between them again, this time pinning Hiraya’s wrists to the desk.

“I’ll hold anything I please over you. You owe me a life debt.” Confusion crosses Hiraya’s face, and Roshan ignores it, considering, smiling a bit as he watches the girl’s wrists strain under his grip. Her physical strength is lacking. “I haven’t had a bedservant in centuries, but I remember it providing some relief. Shall I stuff that pretty mouth of yours with my cock until you obey me?”

Roshan watches as a series of expressions overtakes Hiraya’s face in quick succession, each fading before the one before it could fully form. Confusion, revulsion, a quick flicker of something—*oh*, Roshan thinks—back to revulsion, then indignation.

“No,” she says.

To think Sarimanoc had warned Hiraya not to show her face. Roshan raises a hand to her throat, her skin warm and supple beneath his hand. Her pulse is trilling in her veins like birdsong. “Are you sure? I feel your blood under my hands. Shall I use you? Shall I defile you? You do have such a *disobedient* mouth.”

Her pulse isn’t the only thing Roshan feels. Hiraya swallows, then gasps a bit as Roshan tightens his hand.

Then she slaps Roshan. *Hard.* It's enough of a shock that Roshan lets go and steps back from her again, half-snarling and fixing her with a look that could turn her blood to stone.

Roshan's face is still smarting with the sting when he notices that the hand Hiraya had slapped him with is wet. She'd overturned a small bottle into her palm when Roshan had let her go, he realizes—the remaining contents of which are now spilling out onto the stone floor. Pale grey and already evaporating, like someone had bottled a cloud. Hiraya's hand looks like it's steaming.

"*What* is that," Roshan demands.

"Anti-Hex. And it didn't work." Hiraya lets out a breath, really more of a sigh, then grumbles something Roshan can't fully hear.

"Say that again."

This time Hiraya's sigh says more than her words can as she turns to face her desk again, once again turning her back on Roshan. "I *said,* of course it's not that simple. Nothing that happens to me is ever simple. Why would this be any different?"

"What happens to *you—?!*"

The *audacity* of this witch—

Roshan pauses. There was a flare of magic just now. Not powerful, at least not like the magic in this household. But…potential. Her physical strength may be lacking, but she has a lot of magic for her age.

There's the sound of something being shoved aside on the desk. Hiraya makes a frustrated sound, then:

"Is there even *anyone* here who knows a *single fucking thing* about transmutation?!"

The girl's voice carries in this room. The room is mostly stone where it's cut into the cliff face, its vaulted wood rafters the only part of the space that's not bare and utilitarian. There are still intricate carvings in the crossbeams from when this room had belonged to Sarimanoc, and without furnishings apart from the armory itself, her voice echoes off the walls.

And the answer is no. They've never needed it. Hiraya seems to sense this, as her next words indicate.

"That's what I thought. Whatever bound you is material, otherwise it wouldn't have stayed in the bottle."

Pause.

"Was it not charmed shut?"

Hiraya turns to the side, looks at Roshan flatly. So does the bird. "Do you not understand a single thing about the generative force?"

The what? Roshan thinks. But Hiraya isn't done. "*Magic.* All magic is directed energy transfer. That thing was a magic suppressant, meaning if the bottle were charmed shut it wouldn't matter. The suppressant would have negated it and then itself. Meaning whatever was in it was physical."

Roshan blinks. He does, in a vague way, follow this, but he's never had any need for science.

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

Hiraya's hand slams down on the desk. "I'm *trying* to figure out how it's even *possible* to block magic. Anti-Hex *should* have removed whatever was in you, but obviously it didn't, and I'm not going to be able to figure out why unless I can *see*—"

She cuts herself off. "Stand still," Hiraya orders.

Roshan isn't following orders, but he was already standing still. He raises a brow.

"Why don't you have an aura?"

You can see auras? Roshan thinks. *Without magical sight?*

Every magic user has the ability to detect the flow and form of a person's magic, even sorcerers. For the vast majority of them, however, doing so requires attunement—effectively shutting off one's natural sight in order to *see* those patterns, so to speak. That much Roshan does know, though he's never had much need to understand magical signatures either.

"Was it not suppressed?" Roshan lies.

He knows full well he doesn't have an aura. That's nothing new. He hasn't had an aura in centuries. Hiraya's brow furrows.

"It could be," she concedes. "If—"

She reaches for Roshan's wrist.

And then it's instinct.

Roshan lunges forward, moving to cast—to freeze her body in place, to stop her from touching. It's one thing to touch someone, another entirely to *let someone touch him*—

But it's too late. Hiraya's hand is locked around Roshan's wrist.

Frozen in place.

"Let go," Hiraya says, looking at her own hand like a lock she doesn't know how to open. "Then try that again."

Roshan lets go. When Hiraya is mobile again, Roshan tries again.

Nothing.

They look at each other for a long beat. Tentatively, then, Hiraya extends her hand, and Roshan closes his fingers over the back, then holds her other hand palm-up and takes a long breath, calling the darkness on the inhale. It collects above his palm.

He exhales his breath, lets go of Hiraya's hand. Inhales again.

Nothing.

"*Fascinating,*" Roshan bites out.

And without further ado, Roshan closes his hand around Hiraya's wrist again and hauls her out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

The longest morning in Hiraya's active memory is the morning her mother came back to life.

So it has seemed, anyway. Once Ulan's father had left, Hiraya, Ulan, and Arawan were left looking at each other, none of them wanting to be the first to speak.

Arawan had run a hand through his hair, shifted on his feet.

"Right," Ulan said aloud. "Let's get you settled in, then."

Ulan and Arawan turned to go. There was nothing to do but follow, for which Hiraya was grateful. Being around her mother felt like being around a living ghost. Hiraya knew she wasn't looking at her, but it felt like she was—like she should have been. She wasn't sure if she was hurt or relieved when she didn't so much as spare them a glance.

The day caught her slowly, then, Hiraya barely paying attention as Ulan and Arawan had a half-audible conversation at the top of the stairs about what to do now that Hiraya was there.

I have to break the hex, she'd have said, at least if she'd had the presence of mind to say anything at all. As it was, the sounds of their voices felt like sandpaper, the cool air in the cavern of a room they'd entered suffocating and leaden, and Hiraya wanted nothing in the world more than to take a nap.

So she had. While Ulan left to talk with his father, Arawan had taken Hiraya back to the rooms he shared with Ulan, and Hiraya had barely managed to get her shoes off before she was practically falling asleep on her feet, barely making it to the bed

in time. And she'd awoken alone—the windows were open and her familiar was nowhere to be found—but not for long, because within a few minutes the door opened and Arawan came back, this time with food.

They'd talked for a while, then, Hiraya explaining the situation as best she understood it. She was going to be here for the foreseeable future, at least until she figured out how to undo whatever she'd done to Roshan.

And maybe restore Mae's memories, Hiraya said to herself, letting optimism color the thought at its edges. It couldn't hurt to try.

At least, she hoped it couldn't hurt to try.

"It's a good thing you're on a break from school, then," Arawan had said, an attempt at humor, though the nervous hand he ran through his hair had given away his true feelings.

Later, she'd been shown to the armory after she'd emerged from Arawan's rooms to find a white mayura, tailfeathers out in a fan, blocking the entire hallway, only to part like a curtain at one side as Sarimanoc slipped through in his colorful glory, then took Hiraya by the shoulder and steered her through the way they'd come.

"I hear you need a room that's explosion-proof," he'd said, already moving. By this point, Hiraya had no energy left to be surprised by anything. So she'd just let it happen, trying to keep up with Sarimanoc's brisk pace, glancing down as the bird stowed its feathers and caught up to them on foot. Sarimanoc glanced at Hiraya for a beat, grinning. "I know just the place. Just promise me you'll make a *big* mess."

That had been hours ago. Now, Hiraya's wrist is in the sorcerer's grip as he hauls Hiraya out of her workspace toward the door. It may as well be an iron manacle for all of Hiraya's ability to break free of it, and it's unnecessarily *tight*—

"Mr. Sorcerer, if you could stop trying to cut off the blood from my hand, that would be great—"

The man whirls around. "Stop talking."

"No," Hiraya snaps. "And if this is really going to last until I break your curse, can you at least tell me your name?!"

"*Pick one,*" the sorcerer snaps with a scowl, stopping just shy of the door. Then he stops, yanking Hiraya to his side so hard she stumbles as he claws open a portal, fixing Hiraya with a glare. "People make up names for me all the time. And I mean it. Where we're about to go, do not speak unless spoken to."

"*Yes sir,*" Hiraya hisses under her breath.

Wolfboy, she adds mentally, making herself smile. A beat later, the sorcerer pulls her through.

The place where they are is strange. Or—actually, it's *not* strange. It's a large house with wide, well-kept gardens and a stone path behind a gate leading straight to the door. The gate is closed, but with a wave of the sorcerer's hand, it's open, and Hiraya feels the strange, static feeling of her magic being used as a conduit for sorcery as the man hauls Hiraya inside, heedless of the looks of the two gardeners whose expressions go from confused to terrified in the span of less than a second. Hiraya's heart skips a beat.

Another wave of the sorcerer's hand and the front door opens, slamming against the wall inside.

There's a man sitting on the sofa in the first room off the foyer. There's a slim leather folio on the table in front of him, one Hiraya, for some reason, doesn't doubt that the sorcerer could pick up and bring to himself by magic. But he doesn't. He strides up to the low table and leans over it, the hand not around Hiraya's wrist planted firmly on the table as he leans into the man's space.

"Your accounts, I presume?"

The terrified man glances at Hiraya before looking back at the man more likely between his two uninvited guests to kill him. He nods rapidly.

"Every known transaction as far north as Shudong," he answers, voice harried. He's sweating at the temples, and when the sorcerer picks up the folio and begins leafing through it, Hiraya sees the man glance at her again.

He looks relieved somehow, but only just. Hiraya has no idea what's going on. The man sounds a sliver more confident when he speaks again, though, looking up at the sorcerer again after a beat. "Of course, very often he doesn't *transact,* just—"

The man's words cut with a choked sound as he suddenly starts clawing at his throat. The sorcerer hasn't even looked up from the papers. "What have I told you about making excuses, Nirund?"

The man's only answer is a choked word Hiraya can't discern.

Hiraya can't watch this. This isn't okay. She yanks at the sorcerer's grip on her wrist, only to find herself frozen in place as the sorcerer aims a look of almost paternal disappointment at Hiraya, like she's a child who should know better.

Hiraya wants to yell at him, but her face and vocal cords are frozen too.

"I'm going to release you now," the sorcerer says to the choking man. "And you're going to tell me everything you know about the Dafan transactions you've omitted from this list."

The man nods vigorously.

His face is deep red now, nearly purple in spots. When the folio snaps closed, Hiraya sees him take huge, gasping breaths as the sorcerer hands the folio to her—and can move again, apparently, though she barely has time to register this before the terrified man is speaking again, confessing everything. The sorcerer listens indifferently and silently as the man scrambles over himself to reveal information even Hiraya can tell is effusive.

Through all this, Hiraya holds the folio in her free arm like a strange animal. And when the man finally stops talking, the sorcerer lets the silence stretch almost into discomfort, then asks:

"Is that all?" Again, the man nods vigorously. "Do not lie to me again."

Then they turn, and Hiraya looks back at the sound of the man's scream as blood leaks from his mouth from a tongue that has been split in two.

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When the job is over, the sorcerer releases Hiraya's wrist as soon as the portal closes behind them. As Hiraya raises it to her chest, already looking for bruising, the sorcerer strides out of the long room where Hiraya has set up her workspace with neither a word nor a glance.

For all that the sorcerer is off-putting and rude, though, Hiraya doesn't really know what to do with herself now, so she starts to turn back to her workstation—

—only to about jump out of her skin at the sound of an amused *hm* behind her.

Hiraya whips around. Sarimanoc is sitting in a huge, violet throne of a chair that looks spun from candyfloss, fingers stroking over the head of the white mayura at its side. The bird's long tailfeathers curl around an entire side of the chair, iridescent even in the relatively poor light of this room.

The mayura and Hiraya's familiar are currently glaring daggers at each other. The falcon is perched on top of the folding screen where Hiraya has mounted her diagram for the synthesis of *curiosum.* The *Identify s*he'd done with Astreia had used the last of hers, and she'd been about to start replacing it when she'd been interrupted.

Hiraya's thinking, before the sorcerer had completely derailed her thought process, had been to try to find a way to transmute the *curiosum* into something that could *Identify* magic rather than physical objects. There are a lot of input and output theories she hasn't worked out yet. Sarimanoc just looks amused.

“It’s so dark and dreary in here,” he says, legs crossed, his loose, airy trousers so blue it almost hurts to look at them. “How will you stand it?”

“I’ll make do,” Hiraya answers.

Sarimanoc tips his head a bit. “Clever theory,” he says.

He’s looking at the glass receptacle on the desk. The sunlight Hiraya had caught earlier is still glowing—Hiraya hadn’t let it out. After a beat, though, he turns back to Hiraya, fingers steepled together like he’s about to share a secret.

Hiraya can tell Sarimanoc is powerful. He gives off more power than the sorcerer who’d been manhandling her less than a minute ago. But unlike that sorcerer…well. For as loud as Sarimanoc is on the outside, he doesn’t seem to see the need to throw it around or show it off.

Sarimanoc lets out a sharp bite of laughter.

“*Ha!* Oh, little Hiraya, you’re so cute. If you’re wondering why I’m more powerful than my brother, it’s simple. I’m older. I’ve had longer to learn.”

“…How much longer?” Hiraya asks.

Sarimanoc’s smile takes on an edge. “Good girl, you *do* know better than to ask a woman her age.” When Hiraya raises a brow at this, Sarimanoc raises one back. “500 years, give or take,” he says with a wave.

Sarimanoc’s eyes never leave Hiraya’s face while she takes this in, turns it over in her head. Hiraya hasn’t even been in this

place a full day, but from their last conversation, Hiraya has gathered that talking with Sarimanoc is a little bit like talking with a jinn—while he's not interested in deals or favors, he *does* enjoy drama. You have to say what you mean and *only* what you mean.

"The Black Wolf is your brother," Hiraya says. "What's his name?"

Sarimanoc's eyes light up. "*Ah?!* He didn't tell you?! *Oh* that's so precious, I *knew* deep down Roshan loves all those little nicknames people come up with for him. Keeps him *relevant.* Did you know there's a whole section in the library with legends about him?"

Hiraya hadn't known there was a library, but considering the scale of time in this place, she isn't surprised.

Hiraya stores the name in her memory as her eyes fall on Sarimanoc's hands again. His arms are covered by a two-tailed jacquard jacket in a similar purple to the chair he's sitting in, trimmed and cuffed in luxurious white lace that spills out over his hand. But where he is petting his mayura*,* Hiraya can see the faint edges of the scars on his hands.

All sorcerers bear marks. The price of the corruption that allows a magic user to wield magic against another's will is that it cannot be hidden. Sarimanoc lets out a breath through his nose, a semblance of a sigh. "My dear girl, that's because I was made a sorcerer. My littlest brother ran headlong into the dark."

Again, Hiraya has the feeling that Sarimanoc is warning her about something. A memory comes back to her, then, unbidden.

She's a child. Maybe four or five, seated on the couch in their living room. Her mother is resting against the arm of the couch as she holds a ball of golden sunlight over her hand.

She remembers reaching out for it, the little pang of disappointment she'd felt when his mother had flicked her wrist up and closed her fingers around the light, extinguishing it. She had not yet learned to summon light on her own; her own magic had not yet manifested, wouldn't for a few more years. But in that moment, she *knew* magic, even if she did not yet feel it.

Instinct.

Sarimanoc smiles. It seems knowing, somehow, in a way that unsettles Hiraya more than she'd like to admit. But she doesn't have the chance to ask, as a beat later Sarimanoc is on his feet, vanishing the chair he'd been sitting in in a puff of purple smoke as he glances at the door and tuts. "He's so *loud* when he's grumpy. I hope you know how to take care of yourself."

And with that, Sarimanoc and the mayura both vanish.

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Hours later, once Hiraya has worked on her *curiosum* theory (promising but frustrating, as *Identify*ing something that *isn't* is bit like dividing by zero), had dinner with her brother and Ulan (better, but a bit awkward after everything that morning), then been given a brief tour of (part) of the house by a diwata

named Toti (who Hiraya gathered was the guardian of Kham Luk, but who otherwise wouldn't answer any of Hiraya's questions), Hiraya is led back upstairs to the wing she's apparently *living in* now by an air spirit whose human form (tall, hair short on top, longer behind, and shaved on both sides with intricate, delicate designs that evoke cloud formations and dark, slightly iridescent skin) has the sternest expression Hiraya has ever seen outside an antiquities library on his face, and who doesn't speak at all as they weave through the halls that grow darker the further they go.

When they reach a certain door, he opens it for Hiraya, then glances quickly around inside the room before waving Hiraya inside. So Hiraya enters, turning around to thank the spirit—only to find an empty doorway.

Hiraya sighs. *Seems to be the way of doing things around here. Why say goodbye when you can just vanish instead?*

It's very dark in the room, so after a beat, Hiraya ducks her head back out the doorway and—confirming she is in fact the only person around—quickly snatches a ball of light from the torchlight in the hallway. Once inside the door again, she pulls a receptacle for the light from her component bag and deposits it inside, then closes the chamber, setting it on the first solid surface she finds so she can take off her jacket.

It's not a lot of light, but it's enough that Hiraya can see the room well enough as she hangs her jacket on a coatrack by the door, then her kit and backsheath. The bed is in the center and dominates the space, a wardrobe, dresser, and small desk the only other furnishings. There's a washroom through a doorway at the other end of the room.

But there are no windows. Hiraya frowns.

“That can’t be right,” she says aloud.

No windows means her familiar can’t get in or out if the door is closed. *And come to think of it—*

Hiraya closes her eyes, opens the falcon’s.

Her familiar is in a cage. The room is surrounded on all sides by stone save the door. There’s a large, taunting window in front of it.

There’s a perch in the cage, but not much else. The bird can’t even spread its wings all the way. Panic seizes Hiraya like a wet towel being wrung out as her blood rushes through her body and she turns on her heel, making for the still-open door—

Roshan is in the doorway.

“Did you take my familiar?!”

The look Hiraya is met with is somewhere between disinterested and annoyed. “What makes you think I took your bird?”

“The fact you know it’s *gone,* for one thing,” Hiraya snaps, feeling a surge of vindication when Roshan’s face flashes with surprise, there and gone. “The fact you’re the only person in this house who’s enough of an asshole who have done it to begin with, for another.”

“You insolent *brat*—”

Hiraya is going to move. She really is. Except she can't, because even without magic Roshan is *fast,* faster than Hiraya can dodge, and in less than a second he has his hand around Hiraya's throat.

His grip is like iron, his hands just as cold. In this light, he's so pale he could be a fierce corpse, complete with the angry black marks creeping around and up his neck from the collar of his robes.

Enough to see that the same skin is also covered in blood.

Hiraya feels the feeling of being a conduit for his magic as Roshan freezes her in place. Not fully petrified, but enough that she can't escape as Roshan leans in close enough to sneer in her face.

"You owe me a blood debt."

"You said it was a life debt," Hiraya forces out.

"They're the same thing. The life is in the blood."

Hiraya glares. "You look like you just killed someone."

Roshan smiles. It's cold, dead, and *hungry,* and Hiraya's skin prickles with icy stings as resentful energy begins to lap at it. "I did. I skinned his face while he was still alive, beginning *here.*" He thumbs at Hiraya's chin. "Without magic. A deceitful man. He liked to gamble with things that weren't his."

This is probably supposed to be a threat. "You can't kill me," Hiraya spits back.

Roshan runs a thumb over Hiraya's chin, a mockery of a lover's caress as his smile softens, though his eyes don't. Hiraya steels herself. "I have no intention of killing you, little one."

"Then *what*—"

"Kneel."

What.

"No," Hiraya bites back.

Roshan's smile hardens again. "I could compel you, but that would be using you. You owe me a blood debt and you depend on my good graces if you ever want to see your familiar again. *Kneel.*"

He removes his hand from Hiraya's neck, watching as Hiraya weighs her options. There aren't many. Magical sight only lets her see through her familiar's eyes—there's nothing else she can do, and Hiraya barely knows where *she* is, let alone where the falcon is being kept.

Which is unacceptable. Rage flares like a brush fire behind her ribs, scourging her from the inside, and Hiraya lets it into her eyes, holding that night-black stare as she sinks to her knees.

Hiraya knows where this is going. And Roshan knows she knows, if his vacant, taunting smile is anything to go by. All the more when his eyes drop to Hiraya's lips as he cups Hiraya's chin lightly in his fingers and draws his thumbnail in a line down the center of Hiraya's lower lip, and Hiraya tastes copper as blood wells up under the shallow cut.

“I just spent the last three hours peeling the skin back from a screaming man’s face, *by hand,* before he confessed and let me put him out of his misery. My hands are tired.” A single bead of blood drips down Hiraya’s chin, and Hiraya watches him watch it fall to the floor between them. “Relieve me.”

“I’m not a healer,” Hiraya snaps.

“You have such a quick mind, Hiraya,” Roshan says, indulgent, then presses down on the cut with his thumb. “Such an obstinate mouth.”

Hiraya gasps with the sting, her mouth opening without her say-so. Roshan’s thumb slides further into her mouth, past her teeth and down over her tongue, and Hiraya tastes salt and ash.

Sarimanoc’s warnings flash in his mind.

I hope you know how to take care of yourself.

My littlest brother ran headlong into the dark.

Don’t let him see your face.

And then a second voice:

Says the Spider to the fly.

Hiraya’s defiance snuffs out like a candle.

Did you not know who he was?

Hiraya is silent, both aloud and in her head.

The stories, the legends of the monster who stole beautiful young witches to feed on their magic.

That fairy tale is old, Hiraya thinks. Centuries old. No one believes in the Spider anymore.

And yet you wear protection charms to guard against being stolen away by evil sorcerers.

Arawan's necklace flashes in her mind. Then—unwittingly—her own, the moment she'd handed it to Astreia in her shop.

The line in Arawan's letter: *Mae kept us safe as long as she could.*

Roshan laughs. He pulls his thumb from Hiraya's mouth slowly, then rubs it under Hiraya's bottom lip, wiping away the blood.

"The people of this region once believed Kham Luk to be the home of vengeful gods," Roshan says. He's still holding Hiraya's chin. "They would bring us things: livestock and harvest offerings for Ulan; young, virginal witches for Sarimanoc. Gold or other rarities for my father."

"And what did they bring you?" Hiraya nearly spits.

Roshan's hand slides back along Hiraya's jaw, tipping her face up. She feels the sorcerer's long fingers dip into her hair as he leans down to speak in her ear.

"Their criminals," he whispers. Hiraya feels a chill where Roshan's cold breath brushes against her neck. "Those they never wanted to see again. They left them in a cave to be devoured by *the Demon of the Rip.*"

Roshan stands up slowly, still cupping Hiraya's face, his smile dark and dangerous. "Folklore," he says, and freezes her tongue.

Hiraya feels the cold fingers of Roshan's magic slip into her mind like smoke under a door, too many of them for Hiraya to ward off.

She has no idea what Roshan is looking for. What he can even *see.* She's been compelled before—many times, mostly during her mandatory self-defense seminars at school, where she was taught things like how to guard alchemical secrets when her will was being overridden—but this doesn't feel like compulsion.

What a good student you are.

Even Roshan's voice in his mind sounds mocking. With the hand not cupping his face, he brushes Hiraya's curls back from his forehead.

What darkness are you hiding even from yourself?

Roshan has stepped closer. He wears heavy robes, black on black, the fabric so thick Hiraya wonders how he isn't sweltering even now that it's after nightfall. His hands are cold on Hiraya's skin, his eyes fixed on her face like he's just waiting to find the answer there.

Even through his thick trousers, Hiraya can see the outline of his cock. She looks pointedly at it before meeting Roshan's eyes.

You get off on murder, do you?

Roshan huffs a laugh.

No. But I see you get off on submission.

Hiraya freezes. Roshan's smile takes on a wicked edge.

"I may not share my brother's appetite for pretty things, but even I can admit you look beautiful like this," he says, his eyes running down and all over Hiraya's body. Without her jacket, aside from her trousers, she's down to a white linen shirt, and while she's never had much of a chest, she's *deeply* conscious now of the fact it's gaping open enough for him to see everything. "Sarimanoc keeps his girls in a lake house. I should send you to them, let them dress you and decorate you for me. They're very good with beautiful things."

Hiraya's stomach swoops. Her heart rate kicks up. Tendrils of darkness lick into her mind again, deeper now with Hiraya's slip, and she feels—

> *Bindings. Vines, their delicate leaves brushing her skin as the upper-level elemental slowly wound them around her wrists. They felt like snakes as they moved, strong and secure, like no matter where Hiraya pulled they wouldn't release.*
>
> *A firm surface beneath her where she'd been laid out, knees folded against soft cushions. The slight sting of the diviner's hot wax over her bare back as she floated in a dreamy, liminal space.*

Cool, soothing water all around her, color feelings and tangible sounds and wet rocks under her hands as the remediator finished his healing work and pushed into her, whispering in her ear to tell her what she was experiencing with her senses.

The implementer's cuffs at her wrists and knees, one hand on Hiraya's throat, the other pulling up on the harness around her chest and thighs until her back bowed and she heard the clip of the rigging snap shut.

I see you've been studying more than alchemy at school.

Bastard, Hiraya growls back. Roshan chuffs at this.

Right again, young master!

He steps into her space even further, enough that the toe of his boot slips between her legs, wedging beneath her ass. With the press of Roshan's clothed ankle against her groin, Hiraya flushes with shame, face suddenly going hot as her body completely betrays her.

You see now that I have frozen only your mouth? You could have stood up at any time, could have fought me off.

Hiraya's breath catches, her eyes going wide. She moves her hands to shove Roshan away—but it's too late. Her body is sluggish, her limbs feel a hundred times their weight, and Roshan's look above her is one of dark, half-crazed triumph, like he's just spent hours on the hunt and finally has his kill penned in on all sides with no way out.

“I can give you what you want, little one.”

Don’t let him see your face.

He’s just seeing what he wants to see. Justifying his cruelty.

Lie.

Roshan holds his eyes like a promise.

“Just stay still.”

Still cupping Hiraya’s face, Roshan draws back his robes. First the three outer layers, which he gathers behind him; then he unlaces his trousers, still watching Hiraya’s face even as he gets a hand on himself.

His hands are marked, is the first thing Hiraya thinks.

Hiraya watches in a daze as Roshan’s cock starts to fill out in his hand, his strokes shallow against the underside as he rubs his thumb over the tip. The backs of his hands have black sorcery marks all the way down parts of his fingers, following the web of blood vessels, tendons, and ligaments beneath his skin, and when he turns his wrist, showing Hiraya more, Hiraya sees there are even more marks darkening his arms.

This isn’t the first time Roshan has touched her. But it *is* the first time she’s truly seen any part of the sorcerer’s body where she could look at it up close. Are these even all sorcery marks? Some are, Hiraya can see that—but she’s snapped out of her thoughts and drawn back to the present when Roshan huffs another laugh and slows the pace of his hand, opening his grip enough that Hiraya can see his cock.

Hiraya gasps when Roshan strokes his hand all the way down to the tip, his black eyes flashing in the dark as he again slides his thumb of the hand on Hiraya's face into her mouth, this time between her teeth.

The angle forces Hiraya's mouth open. Hiraya wants to bite him, finds she can't. And Roshan watches, amused, as he strokes himself to full hardness, those cold tendrils of magic licking at Hiraya's mind and finding cracks and fissures in her defenses like water running down old brick.

It's not just his size. His cock is flushed in arousal, but it's not—it's all wrong. It's flushed *grey,* not red, and even the raised veins *there* are black—

It's cold. It's heavy and *cold* on her tongue, between her lips, and when Roshan's other hand finds Hiraya's face, aligning her with his cock, Hiraya's hand flies out to brace against Roshan's leg only to gasp again at the realization that she *can.*

The look on Roshan's face might have been a smile on anyone else. His lips part, a satisfied *hmm* falling between them as he runs the tip of his cock back and forth along Hiraya's tongue.

His eyes flutter closed. His hands are gentle where they hold Hiraya in place, his thrusts shallow and slow.

"So *hot,*" he hisses. "Open more for me."

With rivulets of shame Hiraya feels course down through her back and core, Hiraya does.

Hiraya gags when Roshan's cock hits the back of her throat. As though testing that limit, Roshan thrusts up to that point but no deeper, breath hitching as Hiraya exhales through her nose.

"*Good girl,*" Roshan practically sighs.

Something dark sneaks in and curls up in Hiraya's gut, laying itself down like a contented animal. Roshan smiles again, knowing.

Hiraya doesn't answer. It doesn't seem like she has to. Roshan laughs under his breath, giving one more slow thrust. "Indeed you don't."

He doesn't stop. Hiraya's throat swells as Roshan pushes further in, then further yet, shoving the full length of his cock past Hiraya's lips that strain now where they're stretched around him and past where Roshan has suppressed her gag reflex.

It shouldn't be possible. It *shouldn't* be. And again, Hiraya feels hot shame flow through her whole body as Roshan starts thrusting again and Hiraya realizes, to his absolute *horror,* that he *likes it.*

It's all wrong.

There are tears running down her face. Roshan's eyes are open now, but hooded, his expression unreadable as he wipes them free, then looks down between them where Hiraya is grinding against his leg. "Good girl," he says again. Mortification joins the shame. "Just like that."

CHAPTER FIVE

It's exquisite, having the girl on her knees like this. Her eyes are closed, tears streaming from the corners as Roshan holds her in place and fucks slowly into her mouth, barely managing the presence of mind to keep the girl's gag reflex pinched off, let alone the delicate art of selective memory.

Roshan's eyes flutter at the feel of the girl's heat around him, breath hitching. It's been far too long since he's known pleasure, but *this*—

He's not sure how long it's been by the time he comes down the girl's throat. His climax is unspeakable relief unlike anything he's known in *ages*, the sudden release of years of tension all at once, like he's been flushed clean of the energy that's been slowly clogging his body down to the marrow for the last five centuries.

It doesn't last. As soon as he pulls free from the girl's lips, tucking himself away, he realizes he's let go when Hiraya shoots to her feet and stumbles to the other end of the room, hand raised. There's a shield of golden light around it. Her face is a little green.

It isn't quite murder in her eyes, but the meaning is the same. Roshan takes his leave.

It's just as well. He has no desire to do anything else today, meaning he has no real *need* for magic.

So he goes back to his quarters and draws a bath. After a moment of consideration, he even stokes the furnace that heats the water, standing near it as he strips off his robes and lets the heat from the furnace warm his body.

While the bath fills, Roshan holds out his hands to summon darkness, feeling a twinge of disappointment when there isn't so much as a stir. It appears they really do have to be in physical contact.

Roshan shuts the door to keep the warmth inside. He holds his arms at eye level as he watches condensation form on the fine hair on his arms when the room begins to grow hazy with steam. And when the bath is ready, Roshan sits on the top step as he salts the water with epsom and stirs it, then climbs in.

The moan that leaves his mouth is *sinful.* The warmth—the *warmth. Heavens* above, if any exist. To him there is neither god nor afterlife, but if there were, their favor might feel like this.

It's been a very long time since Roshan has felt warmth. It settles into his purged body, making his muscles feel loose and his mind foggy with the steam. If anyone were to attack him right now, he'd be defenseless, and he can't bring himself to care. He'd die a contented man.

He tips his head back, wetting his hair. Dips his face under for a second so the warmth can touch every part of him. It's worth the cold draft against his wet skin when he surfaces, he thinks.

His mind wanders. It doesn't land on anything in particular for too long. His only proof of the day he's just had is the reddish tint to the water where the dead man's blood had stained it,

and he runs his hands idly across his skin under the surface, cleaning most of it free. But mostly he drifts.

The day she'd cursed him, his mother had had that smell about her that all people have when actively in the middle of dying; old paper, wax, and the smell of damp mildew, vaguely sweet. To this day Roshan cannot abide sweet things.

She was obsessed with love. With being in love especially, the all-consuming euphoria of it. She'd had a horrible addiction to love tonics for most of Roshan's active memory of her, an addiction that made her cloying and meddlesome, her presence sticky, like the residue of overcooked rice on your hands.

His father hadn't been able to tolerate it, not that Roshan blamed him in retrospect. Everything that had drawn him to her became twisted. She'd lived in her own villa not far from Sarimanoc's dollhouse so she could remain in stasis too—unlike Ulan's mother, the sensible sister, who had turned and ruled Kham Luk with their father until her own death—she'd never turned, insisting that it would make her unlovable.

She'd wanted him to find what she'd never had, Roshan thinks. She'd wanted him to have no choice but to pursue love. And he hadn't realized it at first—for decades actually, that the *gift* his mother had forced on him on her deathbed would become *this.*

"My love, you're so prone to anger," she'd said. "Don't let your resentment break your heart."

She'd died with her hand on his heart. Maybe that had been what did it.

No matter, Roshan thinks, letting his head fall back against the edge of the tub as the water inside starts to spiral black. This time, there's the slightest bit of iridescent gold mixed in, and Roshan smiles.

That problem is five centuries old. It can wait until tomorrow.

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Roshan finds the girl awake when he goes back to the room in the morning.

She's on top of the blanket, her sword across her lap. The blade is peeking out of the sheath. Hiraya doesn't seem fazed by this.

She hasn't bothered to change. She's still in yesterday's clothes, hasn't even bothered to take her shoes off. She looks like she hasn't slept. Still, when she sees Roshan, she stands up, clips the sword into its sheath and slings it over her back, straightens her clothes, and makes for the door.

She walks straight out the door past Roshan without another look, which is amusing enough that Roshan takes half a step back and leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. When she realizes Roshan isn't following, she pauses a few paces away and turns back, glaring.

"You coming?"

Roshan raises an eyebrow. "And where do you think we're going?"

He sees the girl's irritation flare. Her inability to control her emotions is very cute.

“I want my familiar back.”

Roshan raises his brow a bit further. “What about any of this makes you think you can make demands of me?”

There’s a pulse, then. Palpable. Magic, enough of it in a single wave that Roshan feels it when it hits him, catching him off guard enough that he shifts a bit on his feet. Roshan sees the girl smile, like she’s seeing something Roshan can’t.

She probably is. Roshan already knows the girl has synesthesia in her eyes, in her case the ability to see magical signatures and auras without having to open her third eye. Roshan had seen this in her memories, in the golden glow around her hand on Roshan’s wrist when she’d surrendered to Roshan last night, letting herself go pliant in her submission as Roshan held her face and took his pleasure from her perfect mouth.

The memory is recent enough to be visceral. He’d woken up cool—not cold, not quite, but cool enough that he wanted to be warm again.

Hiraya looks smug now, though. Immediately Roshan is on edge.

“You can’t actually force me to do anything unless you’re touching me,” she says, tone superficially confident. “So it’s simple. I don’t let you touch me.”

Roshan steps away from the wall and starts closing the distance between them. There’s another pulse of magic, harder this time, and Roshan stops in his tracks—then another.

“What *is* that,” he hisses.

It comes out a statement. Now Hiraya does smile.

“My sword. *Pricha* is the jealous type.”

Roshan feels a muscle in his forehead twitch.

Ordinarily, this kind of thing isn’t a problem. He’d just compel Hiraya to stop whatever the fuck her sword is doing right now that has the blade and her so smug. But of course, the reason why he can’t do that is the very issue that has them in this situation at all.

And isn’t that *just poetic justice*, Roshan thinks. He sighs, then makes an offer.

“I’ll tell you what. You come help me with an errand and I will have your familiar released to you as soon as we return.”

“I want a guarantee,” Hiraya counters.

Roshan lets out a breath through his nose, glancing away as he rolls his eyes. “And what would that be, *young master*?”

Roshan gets his answer when he turns to face Hiraya again to find her holding a small crystal between her thumb and forefinger, waiting for Roshan to meet her eyes again.

“What is *that*,” Roshan demands a second time. Again, it comes out a statement.

“A bezoar,” Hiraya answers, tone flat.

Fuck.

A bezoar is a bit like a magical kidney stone. It can't be negated magically, only by chemical purge or surgery, and they disrupt the body's natural systems, even turning into partial magic suppressants if allowed to grow large enough. For Roshan, with his magic suppressed right now, he has no idea what a bezoar could do to him.

Hiraya doesn't seem concerned about that.

"You may not know about transmutation, but I do. I'll remove this when I get my familiar back."

She doesn't even wait for Roshan's assent before vanishing the stone into his hand.

And *yes, okay.* Roshan deserves this. By any stretch of the imagination he'd gone too far last night, though he isn't actually sorry about it.

He looks down at the stone in his hand. The crystal is vibrant orange, though it turns black wherever Roshan touches it. It feels like it will break into dust if Roshan squeezes it hard enough. And for a beat or two, he's tempted to do just that, until—

"I figured it would be best to work in a space that can withstand explosion, since I'm captive here until I break your curse."

Right.

It appears Roshan has underestimated Hiraya. He feels her eyes on him as he swallows the crystal, grimacing at the feeling. Hiraya looks pleased with herself.

“What is it?” Roshan asks Hiraya once she’s closed the distance between them.

Hiraya offers her wrist. “Calomel,” she says when Roshan takes it, offering no further explanation.

Roshan has no idea what that is, but he’s already shown too much weakness this morning to afford the luxury of asking. So with nothing further ado, he rips open a portal and steps through, pulling Hiraya with him.

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They alight in a wood. It’s a barren place, one house perhaps a hundred paces away at the bend in a dry creek. They’re far in the north, not that Hiraya would know so, all the less because Roshan can travel much farther by portal than most witches can. A consequence of experience.

On the side where the house is, the trees are ordinary, but winter-bare. Unlike the trees that surround Kham Luk on the landward side, these trees actually shed their leaves.

On the other side of the creek, though, the trees are very much *not* ordinary.

The place is called the Barren Forest, a place where the trees had lost their leaves for the winter one year and they had never grown back. The trees are thinly-spaced, their bark stained white with what looks like frost, and it’s utterly silent, lacking the usual sounds of birds or scurrying animals or even wind.

Hiraya’s face is in profile as she looks at it. The Barren Forest is a sentient thing, the magic in there peculiar. The air on that

side of the creek is warmer. Even without wind, Roshan can feel on his face where the heat seeps through.

A breeze drifts in from the side they're standing on. Hiraya shivers, which is when Roshan realizes she isn't wearing his jacket.

"Is that where we're going—"

Hiraya cuts himself off as Roshan releases her wrist and removes his cloak, draping it over her shoulders.

Roshan stands close behind her as he clasps it shut in the front, close enough to hear Hiraya's sharp intake of breath as Roshan's fingers brush the skin just below her collarbone. Hiraya's hand flies up to Roshan's.

"Roshan, I'm fine—"

Roshan can practically see Hiraya's furrowed brow. She starts to pull her hand back, but Roshan quickly turns his around and catches it, not missing the smaller gasp that follows.

Roshan slides his thumb down Hiraya's wrist long enough to catch the her quickened heartbeat before he lets go.

He doesn't step back immediately. He adjusts the lay of the hood against Hiraya's back, arranges the fabric over her shoulders around the hilt of his sword. It looks a little bit silly like that, but she isn't shivering anymore.

And she smells good. Bergamot and spices and sunlight, even a little bit like rain.

"Roshan," Hiraya says, sounding like a question.

Roshan feels a little jolt of something in his gut. He's not sure if it's the bezoar or the sound of his name on Hiraya's tongue. Whatever it is, he allows himself one more moment of indulgence before he steps to Hiraya's side again, holding his hand for her to take.

She glances at it, then Roshan's face. There's the slightest dusting of pink on her cheeks and chest.

The house is very small, perhaps two or three rooms, and very old, assembled from thick logs that had come from the other side of the creek. Near the house, the trees on the other side of the creek grow all the way to the embankment as though they're guarding their kin, the effect more and more claustrophobic the closer they get to the house.

They pass a certain point and the air changes, the leaves swirling around their feet as the house lets out a breath. The house, too, is a sentient thing, and Roshan has never understood how the witch who lives in it can abide it.

Hiraya's hand tenses in his. She doesn't turn when Roshan looks at her before walking up the few short steps to the door. And before Roshan can get a hand on the handle, the door sweeps open, a gust of warm air following that's sweet with the decaying-leaf smell of the duff across the creek. Roshan scowls a bit at the smell.

An old woman's voice calls out from somewhere, probably from the back of the house. "What have you done this time, Roshan—*oh.*"

The witch has long, unruly grey hair piled on top of her head. Some strands are loose and wild around her face. She's secured

the knot with a pair of thick twigs that look like they were snapped off the ordinary trees surrounding the house—they probably were.

Her face is lined with age, her skin pale to the point of translucence, but her voice is older than her appearance, hoarse like she's just spent the last several hours or days screaming like a banshee from somewhere deep in the forest, given the amount of leaf litter in her hair. For all Roshan knows, that's exactly what she's done.

This part of the house looks a bit like a storefront, with shelves along all three sides away from the door packed to the brim with the witch's strange herbal remedies. And not strictly herbal remedies, either, if the collection of jars of amber liquid with snakes, salamanders, and scorpions suspended in them is any indication. There's a mounted bust of a snarling yaoguai on the wall above those, and Roshan can practically feel its eyes on him as he turns toward the witch.

"My. You're in trouble this time, aren't you?"

One of the witch's hands is wrapped around her hip, the grey veins over the back prominent even in the low light. As if on cue, Roshan's chest tightens as his heart rate drops for a moment and he sways with sudden dizziness, his eyes flying immediately to Hiraya.

Hiraya is biting her lip, clearly trying not to smile. She's failing miserably. Roshan's irritation flares, then quickly redoubles as a sharp laugh suddenly splits the quiet.

"Oh, *well done,* Roshan. You've finally met your match. And such a young thing, too—how old are you, girl?"

There's a beat before Hiraya answers, tone hesitant. "23."

23, Roshan thinks, his stomach swooping again, turning away to hide the shock on his face. *She's a child.*

"Ah," the witch says, mock-contemplative. "Age is a number, dear. It's the fault of the old to underestimate the young."

That's a loaded statement if ever Roshan has heard one. Roshan barely resists baring his teeth at her. She pays him no mind.

"That's quite a sword you have," she continues, still studying Hiraya.

There's something happening between Hiraya and the witch. Roshan isn't sure what it is, but it feels a bit like the two of them are having an entire silent conversation in a language Roshan doesn't speak. After a few beats, though, she *hm*s pensively and blinks, then fixes her dark eyes on Roshan.

"Drop her hand, Roshan."

He does. The witch's eyes flash. "How fascinating. Come with me," she orders, turning toward the back of the house. When Roshan hesitates, she continues. "Alone."

And then she disappears behind a screen at the back of the room, clearly expecting Roshan to follow.

So he does. Or at least he tries. As soon as he moves his feet, his head swims, his gut swirling, and it takes a long beat for the feelings to subside enough that he can start walking without stumbling into something.

This has to be the bezoar, he thinks. But Hiraya still doesn't seem concerned, so Roshan puts it out of his mind as best he can, focusing on the task at hand.

He feels Hiraya's eyes on his back until he doesn't, especially not once he starts following the witch back through the dark hallways of the house. From the inside, it's much larger than it appears from the outside, and through the years the layout hasn't always remained the same. He always feels like he's being watched when he comes here.

The witch has stopped by a certain door at the end of one hall. She holds it open for Roshan and follows him inside, closing it behind her, then sliding the latch shut for good measure.

"Hold out your arm," the witch says without fanfare.

Roshan holds out his arm. The witch pushes the cuffs of his sleeves back as far as they'll go, and Roshan winces internally at the feel of her cold, weathered hands on his skin.

She scoffs a laugh. "Warmer than usual today, are we."

Roshan holds his thoughts carefully still as the witch sends her awareness into his body, her magic tracing along his meridians. Unlike Hiraya—whose magic is warm and ephemeral, like a pleasant electric current—the witch's magic is sound and colorless, practically invisible, swift, and quiet.

"I don't know what you think you're doing with that girl, but you're clearly in over your head."

Roshan narrows his eyes, look hardening. "What is that supposed to mean?"

His voice sounds strange. The witch doesn't look up, just huffs. "Don't think you can fool me. You feel like you just catnapped in the sun, we both know you can't get this warm on your own."

"I didn't call you to be my doctor."

"You didn't *call me* at all. Fortunately I have my own ways of knowing when you're about to darken my doorstep." After a minute or so, she tuts. "They're blocked, all right. Nothing in or out."

She means his meridians. "I know that. What does it mean," Roshan growls.

His tongue feels thick in his mouth, his speech slurred. The witch keeps her fingers on Roshan's wrist as she lifts her head and looks Roshan in the eye.

"When was the last time you paid me a visit, grandfather?"

Roshan flinches at the reminder that he has offspring in the world.

He'd never meant for it to happen. The witch's mother had been the child of Roshan's previous bedservant—the first of the offerings for Sarimanoc, before his oldest brother had come up with the idea of the dollhouse, when no one had known what to do with her and Roshan was in the first confusing, overwhelming throes of his curse.

The girl had been a sycophant. Cloying, stifling, much like his mother, desperate for Roshan's attention and willing to do anything to get it. He'd banished her when he found out she'd

charmed the contraceptives she was meant to take to have the opposite effect—a violation of the oath of loyalty she'd taken to the family, having known full well that Roshan's intent was that his mother's line was to die with him.

(Ulan's mother had been the reasonable sister among the pair. Ulan is fortunate that he takes after her.)

His line hadn't died with him. Though it also hadn't gone far. As his daughter had been conceived after Roshan got his curse, she was born with dark, corrupted magic, somewhere between a witch and a sorcerer. She had died young at the hands of superstitious villagers, her own infant daughter sterilized and left for dead until she'd been found by a rogue herbalist and raised as his child.

So Roshan knows, anyway. It could all be a lie.

He doesn't remember how long it's been since he's seen her. He'd found her the way darkness always find itself—a twice-cursed child, once by a sorcerer's bloodline and the second by the curse itself. But she will never die from it, because she was not born with the ability to love.

When Roshan doesn't answer, the witch scoffs again.

"'*What does it mean?*' Says the man made of death," she chides, lifting her gnarled fingers from Roshan's wrist as her magic retreats from him. She laughs under her breath, then meets his eyes again. "I would tell you to count your days, but I imagine it's been some time since you've seen the sun."

Roshan rips his hand free from the witch's grasp and turns, storming back out of the halls, both infuriated and relieved

when he finds Hiraya right where he left her. She's holding one of the jars of amber liquid, this with a large eye suspended in it still connected to its optical nerve, but she sets the jar down as Roshan closes the distance between them, hand already extended for Hiraya's.

"*And you'd better be nice to her, that's enough calomel to disembowel a horse!!*"

Roshan stumbles as he reaches Hiraya, his chest suddenly tightening, and as he claws open a portal over the sound of the witch's howling laughter, he realizes in horror that he really, *really* has to shit.

CHAPTER SIX

Some time later, Hiraya is arranging her workstation for the second time—this time in her new, actual rooms—when there's a knock at the door.

She's bent sideways in front of her still when she hears it, diagram open beside her as she puts the pieces together. The door is halfway open, as is Hiraya's habit, and she sees the falcon turn its head at the same time to the person she assumes is either Arawan (to see how she's settling in) or Roshan (to harass her or drag him off somewhere or who knows what else).

It's neither of them. Hiraya doesn't recognize the person in the doorway. The man is leaning against the frame on a forearm propped above his head, already looking around the anteroom.

"Toti works fast," the man says.

He does, Hiraya will agree with that. In fact, by the time they had arrived back from the visit to the witch in the Barren Forest, Hiraya had removed Roshan's bezoar after his body's initial purge (which had been strange—somehow the calomel crystal, what was left of it, had gone almost entirely black), then been escorted (with no small amount of suspicion) by the same stoic air spirit to these quarters. There, she'd found most of the workstation she'd set up in the armory already in place, down to the screens where she'd begun to mount her diagrams, though her equipment and materials were mostly stacked and boxed rather than laid out.

The room had also been largely stripped of furniture, save a couple of sturdy bookcases along one of the walls and a long chaise lounge Hiraya had wanted to nap on as soon as she'd seen it, at least until she'd seen the bed in the next room. But most importantly, there were huge windows in both the anteroom and the bedroom, the latter of which were wide open—and she'd also arrived to find her familiar perched atop one of the bookcases in the anteroom, keeping watch over the construction.

Hiraya had stared at the falcon for a long time. Her familiar wasn't looking at her, though Hiraya could tell from its twitchiness that the bird knew Hiraya was staring.

She couldn't help it. It hadn't been her locked in a cage all night too small for her to spread her wings. Still, there was no sign the bird was in physical pain—and if Roshan had done something, the bird would have told her. Which meant Roshan had kept his word.

They're very nice chambers. Far larger than anything else she's ever lived in, despite the fact over half the space is being turned into an alchemical laboratory. She's never had an ensuite lab, either.

"Whose rooms are these?" Hiraya asks the newcomer.

They're not in Roshan's wing, which had been Hiraya's first clue that she isn't their original occupant.

"They're my brother's."

Hiraya nods at the door for the man to enter, and he does, closing the door behind him. Immediately this makes Hiraya

bristle. She's not wearing her sword right now, but she clocks *Pricha* by her component bag to one side of the workstation she's currently setting up.

But the man has his hands in his pockets. He's wearing fitted black trousers and a red silk shirt open to mid-sternum, revealing sorcery marks that trail down around his neck and over his collarbone like pincers of a scorpion. Aside from Sarimanoc, this is the first time she's seen anyone in this house wear color.

"Is your brother here?"

The man leans against the second desk, still empty, crossing his legs at the ankles. He shakes his head. "No. My brother has been gone for a long time. He left shortly after we came here. It's nice to see someone using his rooms."

Hiraya puts the pieces together in her mind quickly. "You're Pelamo," he says.

Pelamo nods. "I am."

He doesn't get any closer. And he falls silent for a few beats as Hiraya turns back to her still and aligns the long spiral coil in the condenser, then turns it sideways, screwing it into place and capping it before aligning it with the swan's neck and moving the whole thing to one corner of the desk.

Hiraya turns around to find Pelamo watching her like a student would a teacher when preparing to follow their lead.

"What is that?" He asks, nodding at one of the diagrams currently mounted on the screen.

Hiraya leans back against his desk, roughly mirroring Pelamo's posture as she follows his gaze. "A meridian chart. Magic flows in the body the same way blood and lymph do through the cardiovascular and lymphatic systems."

Much like the body's other central systems, the flow of magic is regulated through the center of the body in several organs, so to speak, each of which has a different function. And much like with physiological systems, dysfunctions and dysregulations in the flow of magical energy usually result from a problem with one of these centers.

Pelamo's arms are crossed over his chest now, and he's smirking a bit at a series of annotations Hiraya has pinned in various places over the diagram. "Is that what's wrong with Roshan?"

"There are many things wrong with Roshan."

Pelamo laughs at this. It's quick, quiet, and disarmed, and Hiraya's first thought is that he must not laugh very often. Though in this house, that's hardly surprising.

"That there are," Pelamo agrees.

He goes quiet again as Hiraya considers. The honest truth is that beyond the fact it's a physical substance, she has no idea how the magic suppressant works, what it acts on, and how.

The fact it's a physical substance is how Hiraya knows it isn't truly unbreakable, though. At the atomic level, there is no physical substance on earth that cannot be changed. That is the first law of transmutation and is the entire foundation of alchemy. Of course, materials vary a lot in terms of how easy

they are to transmute—inorganic materials transmute *far* more easily than organic materials, for instance. But nothing material is fundamentally *unchangeable.*

“I’m not sure,” Hiraya says, answering Pelamo’s question. “Whatever the suppressant did is physical. That much I do know. But the problem I’m running into is that I don’t know what it’s acting on or what it’s made of.”

And she can’t transmute something unless she knows what it is. What its properties are. How it behaves, whether it’s stable or volatile or somewhere in between.

Pelamo looks away as he considers this, nodding a bit. After a few beats, he looks back at Hiraya. “Have you thought about whether it could be a block?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever had something you just couldn’t get past?”

Hiraya frowns at this, considering. “You mean like he’s stopping himself from casting somehow?”

Now it’s Hiraya who looks away. She glances at her familiar—while Hiraya has been arranging her workstation, the falcon has, in a way, done likewise, fussing around a deep wooden crate Hiraya had turned on its side on top of one of the bookcases for ways to make the opening smaller. In fact, she’s just now noticing the bird has stolen one of Sarimanoc’s handkerchiefs.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Hiraya says after a few moments. “When we touch, he activates his magic really easily.”

“How do you know it’s him doing it?”

Hiraya blinks. “Wait. You mean, am I making him cast somehow?”

That makes even *less* sense. But the look on Pelamo’s face has changed, and beneath the easygoing front is something else now. He fixes Hiraya with a hard look. “Are you?”

Hiraya frowns at this. “I couldn’t, I’m not a sorcerer,” she answers.

It dawns on Hiraya suddenly what Pelamo is really asking. It’s so far from how Hiraya thinks, what she could ever even *imagine* herself wanting, that it takes a few long beats for her to right herself mentally enough to answer.

“I don’t want his magic. I’d never even thought about that, my own magic is unruly enough.”

Pelamo seems to relax a bit, then. It’s subtle, easy to miss if she hadn’t been paying full attention.

Another piece of understanding clicks into place in Hiraya’s mind.

Pelamo has not always been allied with this side of the family. As Hiraya had learned from Ulan and Arawan, Pelamo had once been partnered in much the same way the two of them are now. They’d never thread-bonded, so when his mate was killed in his father’s attempted coup, Pelamo survived; but that death is why Pelamo has no loyalty to his father.

That was all they'd said. And this doesn't seem like the right time to press, but she sees now why Pelamo would have an interest in protecting the family.

"What do you think it is?" Pelamo asks again.

"I know it's physical and I know it's linked to his casting," Hiraya says again, theorizing on the fly now. "It's like there's a piece missing between ideation and generation. Like he can't direct his will or something."

Magic doesn't happen accidentally. Magic requires intent: an impulse, a thought, any mental signal designed to make something happen. That is ideation. Generation, then, is when the magic user turns that intent into action—directed energy transfer. Without will or direction, the magic user cannot perform magic.

"But he can when he's touching you."

"Yes."

Hiraya feels her brows cross at this line of questioning. She still feels like there's something she's missing. Tension notches in her gut like an arrow when one corner of Pelamo's mouth draws up in a smirk.

"Can't he just turn it back on while he's touching you?"

Hiraya looks away. She feels herself blush, feeling both perceived and angry again over the course of events last night.

Because it wasn't just—

Her gut seizes, her heart skipping a beat as it suddenly kicks up. Her hands lock up around the lip of the desk. Her body is suddenly rigid, frozen, but it still takes all of her concentration to stay standing and grounded as the feelings she's been ignoring all day suddenly hit like a slap.

She hadn't slept last night, not really. When Roshan had left, she'd stayed more or less where she was, not moving except to band her arms over her knees and let her head fall forward, staring down at the oblique darkness.

No tears had come. She hadn't felt anything at all, actually, other than her sore ass from the stone floor and the burn of muscle from sitting that way for a long time. She'd looked up to find *Pricha*'s hilt glowing slightly above its sheath, its light just a shade or two more pale than the little ball of it Hiraya had snatched from the hallway earlier, still flickering like a candle in the stasis box where Hiraya had left it.

She'd stood, then, still looking at *Pricha* as her head had swum while her blood flowed back into place and her muscles re-aligned more naturally. And when she was steady, she'd moved toward her sword without really thinking about it, then took the backsheath from the rack she'd hung it on and moved toward the bed, laying her sword across her lap as she'd stared blankly at the wall opposite, the only semblance of thoughts in her mind an unreadable morass.

Her sword is attuned to her. All swords like this are. She'd felt the blade hum gently against her legs through the night, its presence warm and reassuring, doing everything it could to keep her anxiety at bay.

Eventually, she'd dozed, the closest she'd come to sleep. And her dreams were restless, recollections of monsters she'd faced on night hunts with Roshan's face, of death and corruption and the intrusive, almost liquidlike feeling of being compelled. Of Roshan's ice cold hands on her face, of how much his throat hurt.

Except when she'd opened her eyes the next time to find Roshan standing in the doorway, it hadn't hurt anymore.

For a second, her sight goes hazy at the edges. Her lungs burn, her head hurts. Tears sting behind her eyes. She puts all of her focus on holding them back.

Hiraya dimly registers Pelamo stepping away from the desk, then the sound of footsteps—only instead of an empty room, Hiraya looks up again to find Pelamo standing right in front of her.

"Breathe. Count of four. Keep your eyes open."

Hiraya nods quickly, then does as she's told.

Pelamo breathes with her. Hiraya isn't looking at him, but the falcon is, helping Hiraya see while her own senses are focused on keeping her standing. She takes another breath when Pelamo prompts, then a third.

This time, when Hiraya looks up, the look on Pelamo's face has completely changed. It's not softer exactly, but—

"I think I understand now," he says, voice gentle.

"Please don't tell Arawan."

Her words are halfway a sob. It stuns Hiraya enough that she blanches and touches her face—there are tears tracking down. *When had that happened?*

“I won’t. What you do or don’t tell him is between the two of you.” There’s a beat, then Hiraya nods. She hears Pelamo exhale audibly. “And Hiraya?” Pelamo continues, pausing, continuing only when she meets his eyes again. “Don’t ever let him touch you in your bed. You should always have a way out.”

Again, Hiraya nods, looking away. She hears another breath, feels a hand squeeze her shoulder, but she’s only dimly aware of the sound of footsteps retreating before the door opens again, then clicks shut as she slides to the floor in front of the desk and cradles her face in her arms, letting the tears fall.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The night is…uncomfortable.

In the past six hours, Roshan has learned far more than he'd ever cared to know about transmutation. Far more than he knew he *could* know about magic—the *what* of it. The *how.*

A large part of why is because Hiraya talks while she works. When the calomel had finished its first violent pass through him, he'd stumbled out of his bathroom to find Hiraya sitting at the foot of his bed with her alchemical kit on her lap, another folding tray table of implements waiting beside her.

Hiraya wasn't looking at him. She was pouring what looked like iron filings onto a collection of metal bars and plates. The slide of a latch sent the metal bars up in an interlocking spiral, and Roshan watched in dazed fascination as Hiraya set the iron filings to spin, added a single drop of dark oil, then ignited the spinning ring with her flint and set a shallow basin of water atop the rig, then turned to Roshan.

What had followed over the next couple of hours, Roshan can't entirely remember. He remembers Hiraya telling him to disrobe and telling Hiraya no; he remembers Hiraya muttering angrily beside him about how much longer it would to take to get the remainder out of his system if Roshan wouldn't let her draw blood.

"Out of the question," something that sounded vaguely like his own voice had said. And when Roshan looked at her face, he'd nearly laughed at the sudden thought that if Hiraya were a dragon, she'd probably be breathing fire.

“So angry, young master.”

There had been a huff beside him, then moving implements, then a brief sting along the cut Hiraya’s sword had made over his eye. An implement being set down, an order not to move his hand. A few beats later, an order not to move at all, otherwise the poison would spread.

He’d drifted, then. His body felt strange, simultaneously cold and hot, unusually solid. At one point he’d smelled something unnaturally clean, then felt something like ice through his veins, followed by the warm, golden glow of Hiraya’s magic.

That was the best part. He’d go through all of this again just for that. Her magic feels like walking into the morning sun, those first, early rays before the heat of the day.

It hadn’t lasted. He was starting to come back to himself when he heard Hiraya chastising him for refusing to strip, something about it being his own damn fault then for sweating through his clothes. And he was right, because when Roshan awoke alone in his darkened bedroom, it was to clothes and bedsheets thoroughly soaked with sweat, the smell of *ammonia* of all things so overwhelming that his throat had burned with it and he’d practically ripped his clothes off once he was on his feet, making immediately for his closet and the thickest, warmest dressing gown he could find.

Hiraya finds him like that. Specifically, she walks into Roshan’s room with his cloak over her arm to find Roshan carrying the bundle of ruined clothes and linens to the stove in his bathroom. Roshan hears more than sees her throw the cloak on the bed, then she’s at Roshan’s side so fast Roshan thinks she must have vanished herself there rather than walk.

“Give them to me,” she orders.

Roshan looks at her for a long beat. Hiraya is holding an arm out, expectant, and she doesn’t back down when Roshan raises a brow at her in question.

He’s too tired to fight Hiraya about this. He feels like he’s been squeezed out and left for the vultures, sluggish and depleted, and after another beat he hands Hiraya the bundle with no further argument.

He watches from where he stands in the doorway of his bathroom as Hiraya sets the linens down and lays his robes out on the stripped bed, then strokes her hand across the fabric as though she’s flat ironing them. Something like steam rises off them and evaporates into the air, odorless and colorless once it dissipates enough.

He watches Hiraya test the fabric when she’s done, rolling it between her fingers, comparing it to the cloak. When she deems it satisfactory, she turns back toward Roshan.

“I’m assuming you have other linens available,” he says.

Instead of answering, Roshan just looks.

She’s dressed differently now. Her trousers are white rather than pale brown, her long blue shirt—more of a tunic, really—loose over them, though the slits in either side ride up high enough to expose a bit of skin just over her hipbones when she bends over. Her curls are riotous, her eyes sharp, her neck bare and elegant over the collar of her tunic.

And she's looking at Roshan, too. Specifically, she's looking at Roshan's chest, where Roshan's thick black curse marks are on full display. Roshan cannot read the look on her face.

"Who *are* you," she asks under her breath.

It comes out a statement. Roshan allows himself another moment of indulgence before answering.

"To you, I am the debt you owe."

Hiraya's brow furrows, frowning deeply. "That doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't have to."

Roshan stands up off the door, then. Slowly, so his head doesn't swim, holding Hiraya's eyes as he crosses the room. Hiraya doesn't retreat, though whether it's because she's standing her ground or she's too stunned to move, Roshan can't be sure. Not without touching her.

Roshan raises his hand to do just that and Hiraya flinches. Not a little bit, either—even without touching her, Roshan sees her whole body lock up as she takes half a step back.

"Don't touch me."

Roshan gives her a flat look. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"I don't care. Don't touch me."

She isn't wearing her sword. Even as depleted as he is, Roshan probably could simply reach out and grab her wrist. But he

doesn't, instead letting out a long breath as he lets his eyes fall closed. Just for a beat.

"I'm cold, Hiraya."

"What?"

He opens his eyes. "Your magic. It's warm."

"…What are you talking about?"

What *is* he talking about? He can't explain this. It doesn't make sense, it just *is.*

"Please, Hiraya. I'm asking. If you won't let me touch you, will you touch me?"

The anger in Hiraya's eyes has turned to genuine confusion. Roshan can practically see the wheels in her mind turning.

"Why?" he finally asks.

"I'm cold."

"You already said that."

"It's the answer." Roshan lets out a breath, glances away for a beat. "Look. I'm not going to use you or compel you. I don't have the energy. All I'm asking for is your warmth."

There's a long beat. This time it's Hiraya who looks away.

"I don't owe you this."

"You don't."

Hiraya's eyes snap back to Roshan's, hardened and angry. "Then next time you want something I don't owe you, you *ask*."

Roshan closes his eyes, nods.

And then Hiraya's hand is on his chest.

The relief is immediate. Instantly, golden warmth like liquid sunlight pours into Roshan's chest, spreading through his body with each heartbeat. It sets his muscles tingling as it pools in his scourged body down to the marrow.

He covers Hiraya's hand with his own, then with both. Closes his eyes again. With his eyes closed, he sees what Hiraya sees—Hiraya's magic tracing along his meridians, over his marks, little sparks that pass as soon as they flare, the pieces of a broken vessel fused with gold.

Hiraya's hand slips deeper into his robe. He lets it, presses Hiraya's hand closer as though to trap it there, his tired heartbeat waking up as the warmth sinks into his bones. The drafty air in his chambers doesn't even feel cold.

And then Hiraya's hand shifts over his heart. Roshan's eyes fly open as a sudden flash of light appears between them, and he hears a voice that's been dead for hundreds of years.

"DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM
THE DARKEST OF SUNLIGHT
HAS FALLEN ASLEEP

WHAT ALWAYS IS NOWHERE
WHEN SHADOWS ARE GONE,

AND CASTS A LONG SHADOW
WHEN DARK IS THE DAWN?”

Mother?!

Hiraya is looking at him, her eyes wide, instinctively pulling her hand free. Roshan laces their fingers together over the back of Hiraya’s hand to stop her as they stare at the star that has appeared between them, bright as the noonday sun.

“DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM
THE DARKEST OF SUNLIGHT
HAS FALLEN ASLEEP

WHAT ALWAYS IS NOWHERE
WHEN SHADOWS ARE GONE,
AND CASTS A LONG SHADOW
WHEN DARK IS THE DAWN?”

“DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM…”

P A R T T W O

T h e S u m m o n i n g

CHAPTER EIGHT

"DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM
THE DARKEST OF SUNLIGHT
HAS FALLEN ASLEEP

WHAT ALWAYS IS NOWHERE
WHEN SHADOWS ARE GONE,
AND CASTS A LONG SHADOW
WHEN DARK IS THE DAWN?"

The words are written in the margins of every page of Hiraya's notebook, it seems. It's been weeks now and they don't make any more sense than they had when they'd first appeared.

Her first thought had been a solar eclipse. *Dark is the day*—the day of black sun, the darkest of sunlight. When there are no shadows, there is no light; when the sun is dark, everything is in shadow.

Right?

Light is the dream. The darkest of sunlight has fallen asleep.

"Does the sun dream of light when it's in eclipse?"

Hiraya had been a bit tipsy when she'd asked that question, having finally given in to Sarimanoc's constant entreaties to come to the lake house with him. It was a few weeks into her time at Kham Luk, and Sarimanoc had been surrounded by at least six or seven of his girls, most of them fussing over his skin and hair or showing him things they'd made. Hiraya was in a hammock that was half over the water, one eye closed as she

held a glass of some clear spirit in front of the sun, watching the diaphanous light through the crystal.

“What does that mean?” Sarimanoc had asked.

“Hm. Maybe—can you miss something you’ve always had, even when you still have it?”

“You think too much,” had been Sarimanoc’s only response.

So much didn’t add up. It still doesn’t. She’d given up the eclipse theory for good when she’d met with the family diviner, a bespectacled engkanto who had told her the next solar eclipse due to their region wasn’t expected for another four years.

“Four years, eight months, and eleven days,” the diviner-spirit had clarified. “And it’s a partial annular eclipse. If there’s discord you need to sow then, it may help, but it’s likely not connected to the riddle. And there are more efficient ways to wield chaos.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hiraya had said, not really sure what else to say.

She’s been there long enough now to have gathered the lay of the land, at least as much as she can without being able to open the doors in the basement hallway. Long enough to know that the family has books about themselves they’ve collected through the years. There are more about Suhat than any—the Dragon of Kham Luk—then Sarimanoc, though those are common until about five centuries ago and then stop. After that, they’re mostly about Roshan.

It's also the case that no one here is horrible to her. They're not going out of their way to be nice, either, but it's been nice to be around Arawan as much as she has, especially now that Arawan no longer has to keep secrets. And she likes Sarimanoc, and Pelamo too. Pelamo scares her a bit—both of them do, really—but she also knows from Pelamo's demeanor that they've lost things of similar magnitude. In the end, Hiraya doesn't need to know more.

But the other side effect of being around Pelamo is that Pelamo knows a lot about the body, for reasons he won't tell Hiraya. When Hiraya had explained the modern science of the generative force and transmutation to him, Pelamo had picked up quickly, and since then he's been helping Hiraya theorize a bit around how magic could be blocked from leaving the body in the first place.

"If every force has an opposite, then what's the opposite of magic?"

"Degeneration," Hiraya had answered without thinking.

"Decay?"

Hiraya looked up to find Pelamo spinning an amorphous lump of bismuth like a top between the prongs of his magnetic heating rig, watching as the rock appeared to levitate.

"No," Hiraya had answered. "Decay is still generation, it's the decomposition of one thing into another. Degeneration is—"

"—Anticreation," Pelamo finished, looking up at Hiraya. "But not destruction."

"…Yes."

Hiraya hadn't been sure where that was going at the time. They'd been working on an application of the *curiosum* theory to Anti-Hex, and Hiraya had been working on isolating whatever the physical mechanism was that allowed Anti-Hex to counteract hexes as diverse in effect as *Forgotten Face* and *Nosebleeds.* In theory, at least, isolating this component would result in a concrete, tangible magical block, one Hiraya could then experiment on as a proxy for whatever the magic suppressant had done to Roshan.

In theory, anyway.

"So it's basically stasis?"

Hiraya leaned in really close to the desk, casting a transparent shield over her eyes as she lifted the cap on the tiny chamber of distillate, quickly vacuum-sealing it and transferring it to a receptacle.

"It's more than stasis," she'd said when she was finished, removing her eye shield with a flick of her fingers. She set the cooling vial of alkahest and dissolved Anti-Hex off to one side, then pulled off her gloves, rubbing the stiffness out of her fingers. "It's complete magical inertia. It's nothingness."

"What happens when you have too much of it in a closed magical system?"

Hiraya leaned back against the desk, an arm crossed over her middle as she thumbed at his chin. "Where are you going with this?"

“Say you have a buildup of magic among too much of this nothingness. Which one wins, the magic or the nothingness?”

Hiraya feels her brows cross.

“Then it’s not nothingness,” Hiraya answers. “That’s not the way generation works. It doesn’t come out of nothing and it isn’t cancelled by nothing. There would have to be something else keeping it in.”

“Like a block,” Pelamo had said, plucking the rock from between the prongs of Hiraya’s heating rig and setting it on the desk. He’d looked at Hiraya meaningfully, then; Hiraya had not followed. “Think about it.”

What always is nowhere when shadows are gone?

Could it really be that simple?

And anyway, when she isn’t tying her brain in knots, she spends a lot of time with her mother, even though she doesn’t remember her. She barely responds when spoken to. Her aura is different now, grey rather than violet. Whatever magic she has left seems limited to the connection between her paintings and the garden.

No one at the house knows what happened to her. Hiraya suspects Suhat does, just as she knows she’s not the only one who suspects as much. She’s asked Arawan to compel her to find out what happened.

“I’ve tried,” he’d said. “She doesn’t have enough will to *compel*. She isn’t even deliberately painting—she just *paints.*”

“Does she sleep?”

Arawan had nodded. “Yes. And she eats, bathes, changes her clothes. But her world is entirely in that room.”

Hiraya is in the library as she remembers this conversation. The sun is beginning to set. This is the best time of the day to be in the library, the golden hour where the explosive evening light off the ocean reflects the face of the cliffs, the edges so close she could practically feel the drop through the library’s huge windows. The color of the setting sun is so vibrant she wishes she could capture it in a pigment and take it to her mother.

Which. There’s a thought.

She bookmarks her places in the books she’d picked up, glances over each shoulder. Stacks the books, sliding the giant tomes on active negation that she doesn’t feel like carrying into her component bag, then gets to her feet.

The next blink, she’s back in her chambers. She sets the lighter books on the spare desk and makes for the windows in the anteroom, opening them as much as they’ll go.

The soft silver metalloid she’s looking for is already poking out of its slot when she opens her alchemy kit. She draws it out, sets up her heating rig, and divides the metal into smaller pieces, which she sets in a basin. If she can align a ray of sunlight into the antimony as it roasts—

Hiraya is about to dispense a drop of phoenix oil onto the spinning filings of her heating rig when her door blasts open hard enough that it crashes against the wall opposite. Hiraya barely has time to set the vial of oil back down on the desk

before Roshan is yanking her from his workstation, then shoving Hiraya into the spare desk hard enough that she feels her back bruise.

"*Fix me,*" Roshan snarls.

Hiraya grabs Roshan's forearms outside his sleeves for balance. It's been a few days since she's seen Roshan. He's been off doing…who knows what, actually, somewhere other than Kham Luk. He's covered in cuts and bruises even just on the skin Hiraya can see.

"I'm not a healer," she answers.

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

He's shaking. His eyes are bloodshot, small tendrils of black creeping in around the edges. His sorcery marks are *deeply* black, far darker than usual, and his hands are so cold they practically burn Hiraya through her sleeves.

"Then let me go, and let me look."

One more time, Roshan growls. But then he lets go.

Hiraya stands, rubbing her back a bit as she makes for her first aid kit.

"What are you doing."

It comes out a statement. "Fixing you," Hiraya answers once she finds the kit in her component bag, bringing it back to the spare desk. "I'm not a healer, but alchemists are kidnapped often enough that we all have to learn basic first aid."

Hiraya looks Roshan in the eyes. She'll brook no argument about this, and Roshan knows it.

"*Fine,*" Roshan concedes.

"Take your shirt off."

Hiraya can practically hear Roshan's smug grin as she gets out a clean cloth, then goes back to her workstation for a bottle of aqua vitae. "Asking for me now, are you?"

"That's what we do now, remember?"

In a small bowl, Hiraya blends the aqua vitae—commonly known as ethanol—with distilled water in equal parts before bringing it back to the spare desk. She dips the cloth in the mixture and raises it to Roshan's face.

Roshan hisses at the contact, flinching back. "Stay still," Hiraya orders.

Roshan's hand finds the back of Hiraya's neck as he closes his eyes. He's purging the pain, probably, and Hiraya resists the urge to scoff under her breath.

After their agreement, Roshan asks for things now. And it's not a bad arrangement. Their first encounter aside, Hiraya isn't a prude about sexual favors—and they have an important advantage.

"It's dangerous," Pelamo had warned her. "But he's going to be more and more disarmed the more wound up he gets. If you can direct that, it's a chance to study his body in a way you're probably not going to get otherwise."

And he'd been right. Hiraya has been able to do things like flush the resentful energy out of Roshan forcefully as he'd climaxed rather than just passively in his release, though those channels close again as soon as they're no longer touching. And the more Roshan gets out, the less insufferable he is for a while.

Of course, it always makes Hiraya feel sick. In addition to the nausea, it makes her lightheaded and irritable, though it usually fades within a couple of hours.

Roshan hisses again as Hiraya reaches a particularly nasty cut just below his lip. His eyes fly open and he seizes Hiraya's hand around the cloth.

"That's enough," he growls.

Hiraya looks at him flatly. "It's enough when I say it is. At least if you still want me to purge you."

This makes Roshan smile. A real one, though still sharp around the edges.

"That is the least sexy way you could possibly put it."

Hiraya raises a brow. "Am I wrong?" Roshan deflates a little, but he doesn't argue. "This is a transaction, Roshan. Keep going like this and before long *you're* going to be in *my* debt."

Roshan's smile drops. He squeezes around Hiraya's hand to the point of pain, once again snarling.

"You owe me a life debt."

"I do, and I'm working on it. But there's more than one form of currency." She's glaring at Roshan now, gritting her teeth a bit

against the pain of Roshan's grip. "Now let go of my hand and take off your shirt."

There's a beat, then Roshan does, still watching her as he disrobes.

It's an entire process. First it's his cloak, which he unfastens at the shoulders and sets over the spare desk; then it's his outer robe, which is made of a fabric so thick and heavy it barely moves. He has a second inner robe over his shirt, charcoal grey with a golden sash, and that one clings to his shirtsleeves as he pulls it off.

The black tunic he's wearing beneath everything is similar to Hiraya's. Based on the color, Hiraya would guess it's usually far darker than his marks. Today his marks are so black the tunic looks like a floating shadow around him.

"That too," Hiraya orders.

Roshan pulls it off slowly, watching Hiraya as he does.

Roshan has the most extensive sorcery marks she has ever seen. They're darkest on his arms, ropes of angry black clear down to his fingers, the skin there more marked than not. Across his shoulders, too, up his neck, down most of his chest and abs. There, they drip down in a point, with more tendrils down his sides.

They're over his hips, too. His groin, what little of his thighs Hiraya has seen, even his cock. This is the most of Roshan's marks she has ever seen at once.

Roshan hasn't let her look before now. He's always been clothed when they do this. And he seems defensive now, coiled in as he sets his tunic on his pile of robes on the desk.

Something bigger than the magic suppressant is going on. The riddle in the light after Roshan had purged the calomel had made that obvious. What it means—if they're connected, that thing and Roshan's hex—Hiraya has no clue, but Roshan runs far colder than any other sorcerer she knows.

Hiraya closes the gap between them. She puts a hand on Roshan's chest just above his heart, letting Roshan draw from her as she channels magic into the fingertips of her other hand and traces Roshan's marks.

Roshan's eyes flutter closed. His lips part, his breath quickening, heart kicking up as it comes to life. His hand slides from Hiraya's neck to her side, his other hand covering Hiraya's on his chest.

"*Hiraya,*" he sighs.

"I don't know that I like it when you say my name."

He opens his eyes, looking at Hiraya through his lashes, the look an answer in itself. She rolls her eyes.

"I also know I can't stop you."

He closes his eyes again. "You're learning."

Hiraya watches as her magic trails along Roshan's marks, keeping pace with the flow of her magic inside Roshan.

It's a slow process. Roshan's meridians are…solidified, almost.

Like a block, Pelamo had said. *Think about it.*

That doesn't make any sense, Hiraya thinks. *It's not—*

Except.

All magic is directed energy transfer.

So if it's blocked, then, he shouldn't be able to cast even *with* Hiraya's magic as a conduit.

Right?

Then what are you going to do about it?

Hiraya leans in closer to Roshan, focusing all of her attention on a particularly thick mark on the inside of Roshan's shoulder. Beneath the mark is his brachial artery, the major blood vessel that conveys blood to his arm and hands. Also beneath it is his *aslesha alphardum*—the meridian that acts as the main channel for active magic out of a person's core. The kind of magic that does things to other things, that makes things happen outside the magic user's body.

Hiraya draws a breath. She laces the fingers of her free hand with Roshan's, then slowly pulls her hand from under Roshan's on his chest.

Roshan tries to stop her. He even makes a tiny sound of protest. Hiraya smiles. "I'm not letting go, Roshan. I just need my other hand."

When Roshan's eyes open, there's something desperate and childlike in him that makes Hiraya's heart seize. Without lifting

her hand from Roshan's skin, she slides her hand across Roshan's chest to the join of his right shoulder.

"I'm going to try something," she says. The look in Roshan's eyes turns questioning. "You've cast through me a lot, we know how that works. I'm testing a theory. I'm going to try casting through you."

That look changes to fear. "Hiraya—"

Hiraya smiles, hoping it's reassuring. "It's okay. I'll let go if it's too much. Though you've also just admitted you worry about me."

Roshan closes his eyes, lets out a breath. Nods once.

Hiraya steps in closer. Close enough to align her arm with Roshan's from hand to shoulder. "This might…feel weird," she warns.

Roshan's other hand is on the back of Hiraya's neck now, fingers dipping into her hair. His hand is barely cold anymore. Again, he nods.

Hiraya collects her magic in her fingers, directing it into Roshan's shoulder.

This isn't how the conduit usually works. Roshan doesn't cast through Hiraya; she allows him to cast, figuratively speaking, but it comes out of his own body. Roshan has never done anything like this to her before, for which Hiraya is grateful. It means her body has never been used to hurt someone.

Roshan wants to scoff. It comes out a sigh. His shoulder is glowing now with the amount of magic collected there, unable to pass.

The magic is gathering quickly, eddying there like a jammed river. Hiraya frowns at this. There's no visible *cause,* it's just—

"How—"

Hiraya cuts herself off as the dam breaks.

It happens slowly, then all at once. One minute her magic is pooling at Roshan's shoulder so much it's glowing like a star in the twilight sky; the next, it's flowing down effortlessly down his arm, meeting resistance that melts away as effortlessly as candlewax before a bright flame.

It's showing outside, too. The marks on Roshan's arm are glowing from inside. Roshan's eyes are as wide as dinner plates.

Hiraya looks down at their hands. Takes a breath, steels herself.

Then she flicks her wrist as though catching a fly out of the air, and both witch and sorcerer raise their hands together as a ball of fading sunlight collects over Roshan's palm.

What always is nowhere when shadows are gone?

"Light," Roshan says aloud. His voice is barely a whisper. He meets Hiraya's eyes. "You're a summoner?"

"Not a very good one," Hiraya admits.

Suddenly she's a bit sheepish. Her thing with the sunlight has never been something she's taken seriously; the most it's ever been has been a minor convenience when walking into dark rooms or studying late into the night when Astreia was asleep, before she'd been given her own quarters as a mastery candidate once Astreia had graduated and moved back home. For reasons she's never fully understood, it's always seemed like something she shouldn't let just anyone know about.

In retrospect, she's not sure why. There's nothing *wrong* with summoning—if anything it's just seen as a somewhat primitive form of magic, directionless and uncontrolled compared to the modern arts.

Roshan scoffs. Quiet, teasing. "*Primitive,*" he says, his hand coming around the side of Hiraya's neck as he strokes his thumb under her lip, then along her jawline. "Oh, my dear. I can make you so powerful."

"After we break your curse," Hiraya says on a whisper.

What is she saying? *After the curse*—?! *I have another year left in my mastery,* she thinks. Her heart is racing now and it's her eyes that are wide—Roshan is so close now that Hiraya can see her reflection in his dark eyes.

And since when have I ever wanted power?!

Roshan's eyes drop to her lips. "After," he agrees.

The light extinguishes on a breath. The next beat, a feeling like cold wind moves through Hiraya's chest, down her arm, and she looks down at her hand to see a small, dense ball of pure darkness collect over her palm.

She stares at it. The blackness is absolute, so dark it seems to absorb light. The light bends around the dark rays that come off of it. The opposite of shining. It feels like dense smoke, like air that's thick with something. It pulses like a heartbeat.

And that's not all. She feels it. It feels like nothingness—like the strange, silencing feeling of sticking her arm into the stabilized vacuum chamber of her family's oil still. But at the same time, it feels heavy somehow. Not in the sense that it's hard to lift, but more that if she wanted to throw it, she could.

Roshan laughs once beside Hiraya, more breath than voice. The sound is so close to her ear that she startles with it, making the dark star in her hand pulse.

Roshan's face is tucked into Hiraya's neck. He runs the tip of his nose up the side of Hiraya's throat, stepping in closer, banding one arm around Hiraya's shoulders and back as he again aligns his arm with Hiraya's, almost like they're dancing. "Like this."

There's another pull of cold wind through Hiraya's chest. This time, it's from the other direction as Roshan channels his magic directly through Hiraya, then into himself.

Many years ago, Hiraya was washed out to sea in a rip current. She'd been maybe eight at the time, her magic newly presented, and she'd been swimming in the ocean with a group of her childhood friends when it had grabbed her, forcing her underwater as it pulled and pulled, swift and strong and impossible to fight. She'd nearly drowned. To this day she doesn't know how she managed not to. By the time she resurfaced, she was hundreds of meters out to sea.

Her magic had been new enough at that point that it was more novelty than anything. Her friends hadn't yet abandoned her to the envy that every young witch's friends seem to catch when they start the slow process of coming of age, and as Hiraya had treaded water, she'd willed with all her might that one of them would go get his mother or Arawan. Someone to rescue her.

Arawan had found her. Hiraya had been a couple kilometers down the coast by that point, arms, legs, and lungs weary and burning, just on the verge of giving up when all of a sudden there were arms around her and she was pulled into a firm chest and she looked up to see Arawan swimming them to shore.

Hiraya feels that rip current feeling now as Roshan cups his hand over the darkness, mirroring Hiraya from above. His arm is rigid around her, holding her close, a solid anchor amid the swept-out feeling that makes her insides feel like palm trees bowed by a typhoon. The next beat, Hiraya feels a pulse as the darkness expands, then a shiver down her whole body as Roshan nuzzles into her neck and takes a breath, dropping his free hand to Hiraya's waist.

Roshan's hand over the darkness raises as the void grows larger. The other trails down Hiraya's side until he reaches the slit in Hiraya's tunic. His hand, barely cool now, finds her skin. He takes another breath.

"*You were made for me*," Hiraya hears, the whisper of a voice coming from everywhere. Even inside her. Roshan is so close she feels it when he smiles. "*Remember this*."

He moves his hand over the darkness as though picking something up by a string. Hiraya feels the energy inside it draw

up. Then he slices his hand horizontally through the center and the darkness dissipates, dissolving into the room in the last of the dying sunlight.

And then he's on Hiraya. Both hands free now, Roshan rucks up Hiraya's tunic as he slides both arms across skin, one across her lower back, the other across her shoulderblades. She feels the ghost of Roshan's lips against her skin.

"I can take it off," Hiraya says.

Roshan's brows are drawn down low over his face. He looks like he's in pain. The darkness in the room is lapping at him now, dark, smoke-like wisps, almost like it wants to come back inside him. The darkness is cold where it touches her.

Roshan nods against her skin. At some point Hiraya's hand had come up against the back of Roshan's head, even into his hair, and when she lowers it to pull off her tunic she would swear she hears Roshan make a sound of protest. At least until she throws it across the room, dissipating some of the black smoke that had begun to collect around the two of them until she turns forward again, meeting Roshan's eyes.

For a long moment, Roshan stops, taking her in. She watches his eyes rake down her body as though consuming her like he does her magic, watching where his eyes linger. She's never had much of a chest, but Roshan's eyes fix on her breasts so intently that she feels her nipples harden without her say-so, as though his mouth were already on them.

Roshan backs her into the desk. He cages her in, pressing their bodies flush from knee to shoulder, cupping Hiraya's face as he again tucks into Hiraya's neck. Close enough this time that the

brush of his lips against the delicate skin beneath Hiraya's ear could almost be described as a kiss.

And then it's no longer an almost.

It happens so fast Hiraya is stunned still. With the hand at the side of her face, Roshan angles Hiraya toward him, his kiss rough and hungry as his lips move across hers, undeterred by Hiraya's shock. With the other hand, he gropes at Hiraya's back, sides, anything he can reach, hips locked together and weighted down to the desk as Roshan pins her against it. His lips, cold at first touch, quickly turn warm, and when his tongue grazes the seam of Hiraya's lips Hiraya opens for him instinctively, letting him in. Letting him *take*.

Touch me.

I am—

Roshan drops his hand on Hiraya's face to his hip and grinds their hips together, one flying back to Hiraya's neck before he breaks off to breathe. His forehead is resting on Hiraya's, their lips still close enough that they're breathing the same air. Even from this close, she sees Roshan open his eyes, then close them again, then take Hiraya's face in both hands, once again slotting their lips together.

Roshan kisses like he wants to consume. He breathes Hiraya in against his lips, his long tongue sweeping into Hiraya's mouth, so deep for a second it almost hits the back of her throat.

He pulls back suddenly. "*Touch* me," he growls, barely pulling away enough to get the words out. His hands are greedy on her skin, his grip tight enough to bruise where he grabs at her like

he wants to bring her inside him, like they can never get close enough. “Get this out of me,” he begs. “*Please*.”

Hiraya’s hands are at Roshan’s waist. She channels magic into one, making Roshan shiver as she slides it slowly up Roshan’s side, making the shadows retreat, once again sending sparks of gold all along the edges of Roshan’s marks.

She’s not sure how long they continue like that. Long enough that at one point, it’s so dark in the room that all Hiraya can see is the press of their bodies and the light of her own magic, the dark of the night unusually thick and cloying in the face of it. Hears her familiar come back, the flutter of wings and sounds of shuffling as the bird settles into its nest—then a couple of clicks, a squawk, and more wing sounds that are loud at first, then grow further away. And then it’s quiet.

That’s weird, Hiraya thinks. Falcons are diurnal. If it’s dark out, her familiar should be inside.

Roshan catches Hiraya’s chin when she tries to break off to look, chasing her lips, and thoughts of her familiar fade to nothingness as she lets Roshan catch them. She brings a hand to his side and strokes over the sharp curve of his hip with her thumb, drawing a gasp out of him that she feels more than hears.

She does it again. Harder this time, inside his hipbone now, her thumb skating down beneath the waistband of his trousers to the apex of his groin.

Roshan shakes at this. He breaks off with an audible groan, catching Hiraya’s hand around the back. Lacing their fingers

together as he guides her hand fully down to his cock, pulling it away only once her fingers start to curl around him.

Hiraya lets Roshan hold her close as she gathers his dripping precome from the tip of his cock. She wets her palm and fingers on it, circling her thumb around the tip a few times until Roshan groans with pleasure and lowers his head, kissing and licking at Hiraya's neck as Hiraya starts to stroke.

She holds Roshan gently against her shoulder, cheek resting on the crown of his head as he kitten licks at her neck, then bites. Hard. Stays there until the pain turns to burning rather than bruising, and then to nothing at all.

Their sounds are loud in the dampened silence around them. The sounds of their kiss, their ragged breaths, the increasingly wet sound of Roshan's precome as Hiraya keeps stroking him off. Roshan's moans and gasps when Hiraya turns her wrist a certain way or changes her grip; his sharp cry of protest when Hiraya stops his orgasm in its tracks, squeezing hard at the base of his cock until Roshan is shaking in her hand for an entirely different reason.

"Not yet," Hiraya teases. "You wanted me to touch you. Let me touch you."

"You devil of a woman," Roshan says on a half-aborted laugh as he comes down from the edge.

"I'm just doing what you asked."

Roshan's eyes hood, then. He runs a thumb across Hiraya's kiss-bitten lip, holding her eyes. "And if I asked to have you?"

“Then you’d have to let me go.”

Roshan’s hand drops to Hiraya’s throat. The look in his eyes darkens. Hiraya’s heartbeat kicks up.

Roshan squeezes. Hiraya’s breath catches in her chest, her eyes sparking at the edges—one beat, two, then Roshan lets go, though he doesn’t lower his hand.

“Never,” he says.

Below the teasing edge in Roshan’s voice is a promise. Beneath that is a threat.

I’m not afraid of you, Hiraya thinks, then drops to her knees.

CHAPTER NINE

Hiraya is marvelous like this.

She's flipped Roshan around so it's Roshan backed into the desk now. She's released her hold, then pulled Roshan's cock free of his trousers, sliding her loosened fingers down the length as she guided it to her lips. Even just with that it had taken all of Roshan's self-control not to take hold of the girl's face and sink into her heat to the root. But he hadn't, and he'd instead been rewarded with Hiraya doing something truly divine with her tongue, focusing on the tip while he continued to stroke Roshan off.

Roshan hadn't even known he liked that. He knows he likes Hiraya's hand on his bare back, her warm magic flowing up his spine as he draws from her, unable to stop. It's so good that when Hiraya hollows her cheeks and starts stroking at the underside of Roshan's cock with her tongue, his careful hold on her mind nearly slips.

He can't do this for much longer. Hiraya has more magic for someone her age than Roshan would have expected, but it *can* run out, and if he drains her too much it will be days, potentially weeks before he can have this again.

He forces himself to stop. His spine cools from hot to warm, but even just the passive warmth Roshan always feels when they're in physical contact is still far better than the bone-deep cold he feels without it.

He moves the hand on Hiraya's neck to her hair. In return, Hiraya takes him deeper, and Roshan feels the tip of his cock

bump against the back of her throat. Once, this would have made her gag, but now she just stills for the briefest second and lets out a breath through her nose, giving one last stroke with her hand before letting go and bringing that hand to Roshan's front.

Roshan's eyes float closed. Gently, *so* gently, he brings two fingers to Hiraya's neck and shuts off her gag reflex, then sighs as Hiraya shifts a bit. The next beat, she takes Roshan down to the root, the hand on his front now skating up nearly the full length of Roshan's abs and chest.

"*Dear*," he says on a ragged breath. He feels Hiraya smile around him, then bob her head as she pulls off halfway, then takes Roshan down again like it's nothing.

She takes her time. Hiraya fucks her own throat on Roshan's cock until he is nearly panting above her, his release roaring up inside him, only to pull off most of the way and clamp her fingers down again at the base of Roshan's cock, leaving him shaking and growling through gritted teeth as Hiraya grins at herself knowingly. Keeps her hand there as she sucks at the tip of Roshan's cock again, rolling his tongue in agonizing circles through his slit, then lets go, his cock just resting on his tongue until Roshan has come back off the edge again.

It's agonizing. Roshan doesn't know whether he loves or hates it. But when Hiraya edges him like this, his release is more entire, sometimes giving him two or three days instead of just one before the cold becomes unbearable again.

It always, eventually does. Now that Roshan has remembered what warmth feels like, his tolerance for the lingering cold has diminished. *Shockingly* fast, at that. All the more because he'd

never realized how *sluggish* he felt with the resentful energy gumming up his body until it was cleared.

And it's not just cleared. It's *taken out, excavated, purged* in every sense of the word by a beautiful, *perfect* witch who took on the task without flinching. The same girl currently swallowing Roshan down like it's her greatest pleasure, laving at the underside of his cock like she's seeking nourishment from it rather than just Roshan's release.

As though reading his thoughts, Hiraya slows the strokes of her tongue gradually, pulling off bit by bit until she's just suckling at Roshan's tip again, waiting until Roshan is nearly growling with impatience before closing her hand around Roshan's cock, strokes fast and rough until Roshan is all but shaking.

And then Roshan makes a mistake. He looks down to watch Hiraya working him, only to find his devious, wicked dear looking at him not like a siren, but like a puzzle he's trying to solve. The thought sends a jolt of something through Roshan that's as much thrill as desperation, like—

This cannot be all that I am to you, Roshan thinks.

The thought reverberates in the deepest chambers of his mind like the echo of a thunderclap from the canyon floor. Enough that once Hiraya has taken him down again, this time rolling his balls in one hand as she swallows around Roshan's cock, and finally lets Roshan come, he holds her face still as he spills down her throat, groaning with his release and shaking where he stands until his aftershocks peter out and Hiraya pulls off, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, and starts to get to her feet—

Roshan pulls her the rest of the way up, flips her around again, and drops to his knees.

Hiraya is so stunned by this that she doesn't realize what's happening until Roshan has tugged her trousers down over her hips, past her ass, then done likewise with the second pair of strange short trousers she wears beneath.

"Roshan—?"

"*Shh,* my dear," Roshan soothes, feeling a surge of pride at how quickly his fingers dampen. "Let me."

"But you don't—oh, *fuck."*

His Hiraya hisses as Roshan tips his face up and licks across her entrance, a slow, languid stroke of his tongue that has her quivering above him in surprise.

It's a crazy idea. And really it's two. His Hiraya deserves pleasure, and as Roshan has guided her thoughts, he's seen now how he'd gotten it so wrong the first time.

Because it's not submission she craves. Of the four interlopers Roshan had seen in her memories, only two had been there more than once. And of those two, only the healer (*the remediator,* as Hiraya's memories coded him) more than twice—the diviner was too cautious, the artificer (*implementer,* says the echo of Hiraya's voice) too rough and inexperienced. The elemental, who Hiraya *had* called back, had turned out to be a bit of a sadist, and Hiraya hadn't let him have her again.

She doesn't submit. She finds partners who are willing to do things to her, and she's choosy about it. They have to earn her.

Good girl, Roshan thinks. *Know your worth.*

That none of those four would survive an encounter with Roshan should he ever meet them, with or without magic, is entirely beside the point.

Roshan's chest swells with possessive fondness when Hiraya grips at Roshan's hair hard enough to pull, holding Roshan's face still as she starts to roll her hips. First slowly, then rougher as Roshan gently relaxes her mind's grip on reality, letting the edges blur like a dream. He grabs greedy handfuls of her bare ass, shoving her hips forward as he does.

Hiraya slowly gets the hint. First both hands tighten in Roshan's hair, then she grits her teeth and hisses out another breath and cants her hips forward as far as they'll go, opening for Roshan as he drinks from her like she is the only well that keeps him alive.

Because that's the second idea. It's a crazy one, but what if he could have some of his Hiraya inside him for a while when they aren't touching? Would it bring relief? Roshan has been half-crazed with the idea since it came to him a few minutes ago. No doubt it wouldn't be enough for him to cast on his own, but if Roshan could just have a *piece* of her—

Hiraya comes apart with a ragged breath, holding Roshan's head against him as she quivers against him in her release. And Roshan caresses her as she unravels, hands tracking all along the sides of her hips, over her front, up onto her stomach. All the way up her chest and over her nipples, which Roshan can't resist pinching.

"*Ah—!*"

Roshan smiles against her, nuzzling into her impossibly soft skin when Hiraya's grip tightens briefly in his hair. Breathing in his scent, bergamot and spices and sunlight, now laced through with sex and sweat that Roshan put there. He could do this every day.

He *should* do this every day. He still feels warm—*hot,* even. Exhilarated. Like everything he has ever wanted or needed is right here in his arms; like he could bring a mountain to its knees so it would bow for Hiraya too.

Roshan brings a hand to her heart. His hand is glowing gold.

What is this? Roshan thinks as he pulls off, tucking his forehead into Hiraya's thigh as though he could hide there from the darkness. This new warmth, this balm for his mind, not just his body, this thing that's spreading through him like the strongest of compulsions. To *protect,* to *cherish,* to—

"Don't let your resentment break your heart."

Roshan pulls away so quickly Hiraya doesn't have time to let go before Roshan is scrambling back from her, frozen in shock. Far enough away that they aren't even touching anymore. The postcoital haze in Hiraya's eyes fades.

"Roshan…?"

Roshan surges forward and touches Hiraya's waist. A beat later, she falls asleep in Roshan's arms.

He picks Hiraya up easily, holding her in a bridal carry as he dispels the thick clouds of resentful energy that have gathered in the room, sending them out the window and into the night.

Once they're gone, Roshan feels eyes on him and looks out to see Hiraya's familiar watching him from a nearby tree branch.

Roshan pays the falcon no mind as he carries Hiraya to bed. Even when the sound of wings follows him deeper into the bedroom, Roshan flicks the covers back with a wave of his hand and lays Hiraya down, righting her trousers before pulling the covers back over her.

The darkest of sunlight has fallen asleep, Roshan thinks.

It's agony to let her go. That new warmth that had arisen in him has already turned to pain, a screaming, howling ache in his heart that he can't dispel, the same part of him that wants to take it back and curl up with Hiraya until the morning. To make her his—softly, reverently, befitting of the treasure she is.

> *"My love, you're so prone to anger."*
>
> *"I would tell you to count your days, but I imagine it's been some time since you've seen the sun."*
>
> *"Don't let your resentment break your heart."*
>
> *"Then you'd have to let me go."*

He places one last, lingering kiss to Hiraya's lips, willing that the agony and the ecstasy of this night might find some corner of her mind to occupy in silence despite what he's about to do.

Roshan strokes his dear's forehead as he rearranges her memories. When Hiraya wakes up—a little later than usual, as her body will need to recover—she will remember having fallen into a heavy sleep after a long evening of running experiments,

so tired when she'd crawled into bed that she hadn't even fully undressed. Roshan's scars, his desperation, his—

—*Everything,* Roshan thinks. When she wakes up, Roshan will be her enemy again. Her obligation.

Her captor.

He steps away from Hiraya slowly, every centimeter of distance a deeper agony than the last. Once he's clear of it, the bird shrieks at Roshan and he pivots, already lashing out with the cut—

The bird doesn't flinch. And Roshan is no longer touching Hiraya, so nothing follows but air.

"At least be quiet," Roshan hisses. "Let her sleep."

The bird clicks at Roshan as he storms out of the bedroom. But he doesn't follow when Roshan collects his robes from the desk in Hiraya's workspace and quickly dons all but his cloak, then takes his leave.

CHAPTER NINE

Hiraya wakes up with a splitting headache and almost no recollection of going to bed last night.

She sits up. It's fully light outside. Her windows face west, so it's hard to tell what time it is based on the position of the sun.

The sound of flapping wings follows and then disappears. A few seconds later, Hiraya's third eye blinks open and she squints at the light coming in from the roof, then shoots out of bed.

It's nearly noon. Maybe an hour and change shy of it. Hiraya hasn't slept in this late in months, and the shock and the cold feel of the stone tile under her feet jolts Hiraya further awake as she looks down at herself.

She's still wearing her trousers. That's her first clue that something isn't quite right. Since coming to Kham Luk, with how hot it is here, she typically sleeps in just her underwear. Especially since she already runs warm. She starts to rack her brain for details, but her headache is bad enough that it hurts to think too hard, so before she lets herself assess any further she makes her way into her makeshift lab, already looking for her kit.

The lab is where she remembers it being. That's good—one less thing to worry about. She hasn't been kidnapped. Her familiar's nest is still in its place on the top shelf, and Hiraya smiles as she sees not one but several of Sarimanoc's handkerchiefs now poking out of it.

"Are you still fighting with Persimmon?" Hiraya asks her familiar once it alights in the window.

The bird just tips its head. Hiraya gets a probe at her mind, then, one that feels a lot like the bird telling her to focus.

Pricha is on its hanger near her workstation, still mounted on the wall between the bedroom and the lab. Right where she left it. So is the refractory rig she'd set up on the windowsill last night to catch the evening light to make a pigment for her mother—

Hiraya's head *screams,* then. A sudden shift, blackness, and then she's looking at herself with an idle *curiosum* and that's as far as she gets as the noise and the light become hard to bear. So she changes course, now focusing on trying to remember the remedy her ex had taught her for how to cure headaches.

Hiraya sets up her heating rig, letting the celandine and nettle simmer before adding everything else, removing and straining the mixture once it's the right color. Once it's cool, she swallows it down like that, grimacing at the taste.

It works, though. It gets rid of her headache. It doesn't do anything about her memories, though when Hiraya tries to access them again, it at least doesn't feel like someone is driving a large nail through her skull.

The *curiosum.* In the memory, her heating rig is in the middle of the desk as she works on—Hiraya squints as though it could help her remember better, the detail here is weirdly imprecise—trying to isolate whatever mechanism allows *Identify* to find like kind to its inputs.

Hiraya's brow furrows. She'd disproven that method *weeks* ago—*Identify*ing a negative doesn't actually work. It's too

indefinite. Nothing can be found if there is nothing there to find.

She looks at her workstation. There are cut-up pieces of antimony in a copper basin that's sitting on the prongs of her heating rig, its iron filings spilled all over the base and onto the desk beneath. On the other desk, one of the books she'd brought back from the library is balancing precariously on the corner of another, one strong breeze from falling to the floor.

Hiraya crosses over to the books, straightens them. Brings a hand to her neck.

And winces.

"*Ow*," she says aloud.

Hiraya's neck stings, then throbs. She crosses back into her bedroom and looks at herself in the vanity mirror above her credenza.

Her neck isn't bleeding, just bruised. But it's a huge, blooming spot of purple on her neck, and there are *teeth marks* in it.

Hiraya frowns as she gingerly traces the mark with a fingertip. Already, the list of potential culprits is barely over zero, given she wasn't kidnapped and that whoever altered her memory doesn't know anything about transmutation. They did a pretty good job with the details of the room, aside from the rig on the windowsill. But there were still some things that gave the memory away as having being tampered with.

Of all the formal disciplines—remedies, implements, elements, charms, astrology & divination, philosophy, and alchemy—

alchemy is by far the most dangerous. No other magical discipline deals with magic with the precision needed to change one thing into another. Because while many other disciplines *involved* transmutation—all but philosophy and astrology, really, though even astrologers need a basic understanding of charms in order to manipulate time—none but alchemy *understood* transmutation, the very *how* of magic itself. Because of this, in addition to basic first aid, all students of alchemy receive rigorous training in how to guard alchemical secrets within their mind against those who would otherwise steal them—for *their* protection, not for the alchemist's.

Hiraya has been compelled before. Sorcery is legal in the north as long as it's licensed, and her mandatory self-defense seminars have involved all manner of compulsion. Everything from hallucinations of the senses to unwilled body movement to memory tampering and obfuscation—or, as it's more commonly known, the art of guarding secrets.

Hiraya's alchemical secrets are in there. Her mental labyrinth is a series of trap doors that look like memories, false images based on events in her life that have been particularly remarkable to her. Core memories. They're not completely impenetrable, but the best way to hide something is often in plain sight. And when the sorcerers in her obfuscation seminar had compelled her, the only one who had been able to tell the difference between the true and false memories had been the Jin School's young headmaster—who wasn't even a sorcerer, but who had mastered the art of compulsion without compulsion with such precision that he was rumored to be uncompellable.

When dealing with tampered memories, you look for inconsistencies. Fractures in the timeline, objects that are out of place. The most attentive practitioners left identifiers in every room they frequented, little objects that those manipulating their memories might not think to incorporate. Many wore bracelets or rings with particular patterns on them or had subtle marks, either natural or artificial, that only the most attentive interloper would notice.

This was a quick job. Whoever had manipulated her memories had done it fast, like they were in a rush. They hadn't sewn the pieces of the timeline back together quite right. Because while the room was mostly correct, Hiraya had no idea where the *curiosum* had come from or where it had gone. Why her notebook was blank there, when what had actually been on her desk was an old alchemical recipe for glass of antimony. Why she hadn't put her heating rig away properly so she wouldn't have to clean up a mess of iron filings off a stone tile floor.

There were seams.

Hiraya thinks about those seams as she studies herself in the mirror. The mirror is half length, long and wide enough to capture the entire yawning window in her bedroom. The daytime sun is glinting off the waves behind her.

Hiraya touches the mirror.

The mirror doesn't move. Hiraya looks at it closely, waiting to see if it will warble or ripple, affect of mirror being one of the surest signs of sensory manipulation. The surface remains smooth as the glass beneath it, untouched but for her smudged fingerprint.

She brings her hand to her neck again. The mark is deep, angry purple, almost black in places, the shape of the teeth unmistakably human in origin.

There's nothing magical about the mark, though. It's just a bruise. A nasty one, but at least now Hiraya knows who messed with her memories.

And no sooner does Hiraya have that thought than Roshan appears in the window.

Hiraya had kept them open last night. She usually does, since Ulan's (and now Arawan's) weather magic means it doesn't rain in Kham Luk unless they want it to. Most of the time, the two of them keep it natural, though the house itself rarely feels more than a light sprinkle.

Roshan is looking at her. He isn't wearing his cloak, just his outer robe, one Hiraya knows to be one of his lighter ones.

So Roshan had come to her last night. That makes sense; Hiraya's memories otherwise tell her it's been a few days since she's seen Roshan. And Roshan would never wear that robe unless he were warm.

Roshan is looking at his neck. He's looking at it in the mirror. The front side, the one where the mark is visible, his eyes tracking the movement of Hiraya's hand as she traces it. His expression is unreadable.

"How did you learn to key *Forgotten Face*?"

Roshan follows Hiraya's hand for another beat, then his eyes snap to hers in the mirror.

It's a guess. A good guess, though. There is exactly one person she knows who could have both put the mark on her neck last night *and* tampered with her memories. Still, Roshan scowls.

"What is *Forgotten Face?*"

Roshan practically spits the words. Hiraya lowers her hand.

"The hex you sent with Arawan's cursed letter."

At this, the corners of Roshan's lips turn up in a smirk.

"That wasn't a hex, Hiraya."

"But you still did it."

"When did I say that?"

Roshan's smirk has deepened as he's braced on a forearm against the windowsill, reminding Hiraya pointedly of Pelamo.

"Who else would have done it?"

Roshan arcs a brow. "You don't think Arawan could have done it himself?"

Hiraya stills, then pivots slowly on her heel until she's facing him.

"What are you talking about?"

Roshan doesn't respond right away. Instead, his eyes rake slowly down Hiraya's body as though appraising her, the look in his eyes dark and…well. Something else.

Hiraya feels herself blush. It's been a couple of months now since her last night hunt, and without the imminent specter of ghosts, ghouls, demons, and all other manner of monsters in her immediate future, Hiraya has had little motivation to keep up her athletic training. Especially given the specter that has replaced it, the one that had landed her in this mess in the first place.

Roshan already has a loud stare. But something about this look sends a dark flash through Hiraya along with something hot that flows straight to her core, and suddenly Hiraya wonders if she should pick her physical training back up.

After a couple of long beats, Roshan meets her eyes again.

"Oh, my dear Hiraya. How could I possibly have known who to key the hex to without having met you?"

Hiraya's blush deepens. "Don't call me that," Hiraya mutters as Roshan takes a seat on the sill of the open window. "We both know you could have just looked through his memories and found me."

"You've already given me permission. Perhaps you don't remember."

Hiraya's fluster turns to anger with a sudden, palpable *snap.*

"Answer me."

"A *hex*," again with the sneer at that word, "that thorough—don't look at me like that, of course I know why you came here—could not be keyed secondhand from memory alone. It would require extensive personal knowledge."

“So what, then, you told him how to do it?”

“No.” Roshan’s look changes for some reason, again becoming unreadable. “He went to Sarimanoc first. When he refused, Arawan came to me.”

“*Then what did you tell him?!*”

“Temper, Hiraya.” Hiraya’s jaw clenches in frustration as she bites back the urge to bare her teeth. “All I did was tell him where to go to find the magic he was looking for.”

There’s a long beat, then the angry wind falls out of Hiraya’s sails as a stonelike heaviness settles in her chest.

The truth is this: given everything else she’s found himself swept into and responsible for at Kham Luk, Hiraya has spent almost no time on the question of where the *Forgotten Face* had come from. It had been moot, after all, once she’d gotten rid of the vial and lost the letter to the wind, once every fear she’d had before arriving had proven true. Before she’d realized that no matter how bad things may seem, they can truly, always get worse.

And Hiraya had been careless. She’d just *assumed.* She was familiar with normal *Forgotten Face,* the kind reversible by Anti-Hex—but even normal *Forgotten Face* is illegal this far south. That’s why it’s kept in secret back rooms, if it could even be found at all. The kind Hiraya had been sent—*whatever Hiraya* had been sent, clearly it was something more.

She sees her mistake now. She sees how it makes no sense for Arawan to have somehow gotten ahold of *Forgotten Face* this far south. Sure, the charmer’s shop back home carried it, but

Hiraya has also learned these last couple of months that Arawan barely knows his acids from his bases, let alone how to alter one of the most complex hexes ever made. Assuming he even knew how to get his hands on it.

Arawan isn't stupid. He just isn't book smart. It's fitting, Hiraya thinks, that he's ended up thread-bonded to an elemental—elements are the most intuitive form of magic, the least rule-bound, and Arawan has always been at his best when he trusts his instincts.

So how had he done it? The magic in the letter—it had been the same as Roshan's resentful energy, dark, cold, and smoke-like. Like all resentful energy. But if Roshan hadn't done it either, then how—

Hiraya looks up to find Roshan on his feet. He's holding out a hand, looking expectant.

Of *course* he's just here for a job. Hiraya lets out a long breath through her nose and rolls her eyes.

"Let me at least get dressed first."

Roshan's eyes run down Hiraya's body again. "Of course, *young master*."

Hiraya tosses a look over her shoulder that's somewhere between confused and angry as she makes for her closet, but Roshan is staring at her ass and doesn't seem to notice.

Inside, Hiraya discreetly snatches a ball of sunlight once she's out of Roshan's line of sight, quickly rifling through her shirts

for something she doesn't mind getting dirty and changing out of yesterday's trousers.

"Where are we going?"

Hiraya doesn't expect Roshan to answer, but it would be nice to know if she needs to wear a coat today.

"Not far."

Better than nothing, Hiraya thinks, sliding one of her leather vests off a hanger.

She's still rolling up her sleeves when she walks out and through the adjacent doorway into her makeshift lab, ignoring Roshan's look of distaste as she unhooks *Pricha* from its hook on the wall and straps on her backsheath. Nor does she give Roshan time to argue before she's crossing the room and holding a hand out for Roshan to take, brooking no further argument.

Roshan looks warily at *Pricha.* Still, though, he takes Hiraya's hand and rips open a portal, vanishing both of them through.

The first thing Hiraya feels when they rematerialize in an idyllic suburban neighborhood is déjà-vu. It's not the same house as the first job—rather than verdant, diligently-tended gardens, this house is clearly home to an herbalist, with rows and rows of medicinal plants growing in rows of controlled chaos. The aesthetic is contained by a series of sculptures carefully placed to draw the eye, mostly of elemental spirits. And that's all Hiraya has time to notice before once again, Roshan is pulling her toward the door and throwing it open as though it had

neither lock nor handle, sending it crashing loudly into the wall beside it.

There's a family there. They're seated for dinner at one end of a long, formal dining table, a husband, his wife, and two young children, a boy and a girl. There's an infant in the mother's lap.

"Go," Hiraya hears the husband say to his wife. He's sitting with his back to the door; his wife is at the head of the table, and it's her shocked face Hiraya sees as her husband speaks. "Take the children upstairs. Use the key."

"Decha—!"

"*Go,*" the man says again.

There's a beat. Then the woman gets up and leaves, adjusting the sling she's holding the infant in and holding her other hand out for her children. She doesn't take her eyes off Roshan and Hiraya until she reaches the stairs, and even then she turns back once she's herded her children ahead of her.

Once she's out of sight, the man turns around.

"I've been wondering when you'd finally come calling."

"Have you," Roshan says. "I don't think I have to remind you that you're late on your payments."

"I'm well aware," the man says. His eyes turn to Hiraya for a beat, then back to Roshan. "I don't have it."

Roshan tips his head in mock indulgence. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm done."

Silence. A long beat falls.

“You’re done,” Roshan echoes.

“I’m done.”

“Are you.”

The man’s eyes narrow. “I am. And I’m of no more use to you, so there’s no point in killing me.”

The man is looking at Hiraya again. She can practically see him making calculations in his mind, and a feeling of apprehension starts to tug at her gut.

She can predict Roshan now. It’s not perfect, but she’s learned to identify the edge Roshan gets in his voice when he’s about to freeze Hiraya into immobility, or to otherwise stop Hiraya from interfering in whatever he’s about to do. It’s been a while since he’s done that—Hiraya also learned very quickly to pick her battles—but she knows the ebbs and flows of Roshan’s temper now, especially since she’s started purging Roshan.

Roshan glances at Hiraya now with yet another unreadable look, there and gone, barely taking his eyes off the man in front of them. He’s still sitting in his chair, still looking at Hiraya, still assessing something she can only begin to guess at.

The air stills. The house quiets. Silence falls, heavy and palpable.

“Is that so,” Roshan answers, voice low and dangerous. “Then if you’re not of any use to me, why bother keeping you alive?”

Hiraya expects the man to flinch, to go pale. He does neither of these things. In the span of an instant, he vanishes and reappears in front of Hiraya with a dagger drawn and a smirk on his face.

He charges toward her.

Time blurs. The man is perceptive, she realizes—he's noticed that Roshan hasn't let go of her hand the whole time, had somehow identified that she is the one providing a conduit for Roshan's magic. He must have some kind of magical sight, she thinks. Something not like his, but deeper, better trained—able to detect flows of energy somehow, not just visual patterns.

All of these thoughts run through Hiraya's head in a fraction of a second. In the same second, she sees the man's dagger raised, aimed straight for her heart. And no sooner can she draw breath than she feels a tug at her back and the sound of metal-on-metal as Roshan draws *Pricha* out of its sheath and ignites its unique property—a blade of light sharper than any sword, an ability that turns *Pricha* into a two-sided blade for the length of a single swing—and brings it down one-handed across the man's neck, decapitating him in a single blow.

Blood erupts over the floor. The man's head hits the floor first, his eyes blinking once before falling still, mere fractions of a second before his body buckles and collapses beneath its own weight. Blood immediately begins to pool beneath his body and head, spreading out like an ink stain across the pale wood floor.

Hiraya hears a woman's scream. Roshan is still holding *Pricha* as the light fades, and Hiraya sees him watch in fascination as a trickle of blood drips down onto the floor. A beat later, he

wipes both sides off on the dead man's shirt and sheathes *Pricha* at Hiraya's back, then turns to go.

"*Monster—!!*"

He glances up at the woman on the stairs.

"Why yes," he says, his voice barely above a whisper, yet still as audible as if he were speaking. "You and your family would do well not to cross me again."

Roshan opens a rip and vanishes them over the sound of the woman's screams. They alight back in Hiraya's bedroom, and Roshan releases Hiraya's wrist and strides toward the door in silence without a backward glance, leaving Hiraya gawking at him as a thick coil of dread nestles deep in her gut.

Hiraya stares at the door for a long time after Roshan leaves, her mind reeling.

Only she is supposed to be able to wield her sword.

CHAPTER TEN

Roshan goes straight back to his chambers.

The sword. He hadn't thought, hadn't *blinked*. There had been one simple need: protect Hiraya. He hadn't had time to gather power for the cut, so he'd done the first thing that had come to mind.

He'd reached for the nearest weapon.

He's pacing in his room now, trying to wrap his head around how it had even been possible for him to draw the blade at all. Hiraya's sword has always warned Roshan back—*the jealous type,* she'd said during Roshan's first real encounter with it. Protective. Devoted.

Roshan has no trouble believing that. He has no trouble believing that, because *so is he.*

Roshan sits down on the bed and bends forward, his face in his hands. He knows exactly what this means. At some point over the past weeks, he'd softened toward Hiraya. Not *the girl,* not *the alchemist,* certainly not *young master* anymore. He's Hiraya—*his Hiraya*. His treasure. The one he wants to guard. His own personal sun.

"Who casts a long shadow when dark is the dawn," Roshan whispers to himself on a wavering breath. He'd darkened his sun, and now he is left in a shadow of his own creation.

Roshan's chest squeezes. His face burns. A few beats later, something wet rolls down his cheek, and Roshan catches it on his finger, pulling his hand forward enough to see a single thick

tear of pure, obsidian black resting on the back of it like a dark pearl.

He stares at it. It's been centuries since he's cried. He hadn't even realized he was capable of it anymore. When, after a few beats, Roshan wipes it away with his thumb, the tear leaves an ink stain on his fingers that makes Roshan laugh once, bitterly, before getting to his feet again and walking straight out the door.

Once out, he doesn't stop. He doesn't stop when he hears Sarimanoc stir and squawk at him about where he's going; doesn't stop when Toti materializes out of the stone near the door, looking sternly at Roshan, like he knows what Roshan is intending.

It's entirely possible he does. Roshan has never understood Toti, doesn't understand how much of the house *is* Toti as opposed to just maintained by him. But the walls in this house have always had ears, and Roshan blows by Toti with barely a glance, fighting back a sigh when the warmth of the sun hits him through the fabric of his robes.

He starts walking.

The entrance to the house is level with the flat expanse of plateau. The wind is strong today, strong enough to make the air taste like dust and salt from the ocean off the cliffsides. Roshan doesn't look back.

The place where he's going takes him a matter of seconds to get to by portal. On foot, it takes him several hours, the relatively short distance made that much longer by the sheer number of steep cliffs and hillsides he has to traverse to get

there. As he walks, the sun grows higher in the sky, but Roshan feels progressively less and less of it as the color goes dim in the sky around him, deepening from a grey veil to the typical monochrome that has been all he's seen for the better part of a century.

His robes are dusty by the time he reaches the edge of the gorge. His feet don't just ache, they burn. He's shivering despite what must be mid-afternoon sunlight all around him, though he can't place the sun in the sky.

It's the darkness that has called him. The darkness he has followed to get here. Like calls to like. And by the time he gets there and falls to his knees barely a pace back from the edge, the only warmth remaining in him is a tiny spot of sunlight right next to his heart.

Roshan clutches at it with one hand. With the other, he unties his outer robe, letting it pool on the ground behind him as he returns his hand to the spot of warmth and shuffles forward toward the edge on his knees, bracing on a hand.

Now, the tears come. They come thick and slow, old molasses seeping through the seals of an upturned jar. And they track down slowly, the few that make it far enough spilling ink-black onto the dust below.

Roshan's hand moves to his heart, where the freezing darkness stings and burns more deeply than it ever has.

On her deathbed, when his mother had been wasting away under the effects of the love tonics she'd been abusing for so long, Roshan had sat with her in the lake house during the

golden hour as she'd stroked his hair and face, her smile soft and sad.

"My love, you have so much anger," she'd said.

It had taken most of his self-control not to flinch. Of *course* he did. Let alone the fact he was the youngest bastard son of the most powerful sorcerer ever known, he'd also turned young in the hopes of pleasing him—then had let the Dragon of Kham Luk harden him, teaching him to siphon away all emotions that didn't serve him.

"You can't trust them. Look at your mother, at Ulan."

Roshan's brows had crossed. "Ulan?"

Suhat nodded. "Ulan is sharp, but distractable. In many ways he is more your mother's son than his own."

The two sisters had come to Kham Luk together several centuries ago. While powerful sorcerers can live long lives, very few reach the age that Suhat has, and by then Sarimanoc's mother was dead and Suhat had been in want of another wife. Ulan's mother, a powerful elemental from the distant high plains, had established herself and her younger sister in the wake of their father's death as some of the wealthiest and most powerful nomads in their region. This was due in large part due to her power—she could make or break harvests, could force ends to droughts or make the soil barren. Far from fearing her as a witch, people feared her as a god.

But it wasn't just her. It was also her younger sister's softer influence, the elder's sternness attenuated by the younger's diplomacy and skill as a fortune teller. The younger of the two

had a particular talent for matchmaking, and when people would travel large distances to pay homage to her older sister or to consult with the younger on prospective marriages, she was known to refuse payment, much to her older sister's annoyance.

"The gift of a good match is payment enough," Roshan's mother had told him once when he was still a child, as though she were trying to convince him of something. Before he'd turned, when it had been her who sat by his bedside as she'd tucked him into bed, her eyes still glassy after once again being refused by his father. "There is no greater gift than happiness."

They'd come together, once the older of the two had accepted Suhat's proposal. The younger had assumed she would be taken as a wife too.

It hadn't worked out that way. For as powerful as she was as a witch, the older of the two was far more powerful as a sorcerer. And between her power, her business acumen, and her regal presence, it wasn't long at all before she became the favored sister and the younger had fallen out of favor, then very nearly out of memory altogether.

Roshan still isn't sure how he was born. The rumor went that at a harvest festival one year, Roshan's mother had drugged her sister and Suhat and had taken her older sister's place one night. She'd been caught and sent away, confined to the lake house—and she had woken up to find herself bound to the house, in stasis, unaging, unable to stray outside a certain radius no matter how hard she tried to leave.

He hadn't lived there. Not full-time. He'd been reared like Ulan had, trained in the ways of the family, though allowed a certain

number of days per year to visit his mother. And he'd turned so young that most of his active memory is of her unwell, fixated on the idea that love could bring her back into Suhat's good graces.

Don't let your heart go dark, she'd often said. *Only those who want to keep their monsters love the darkness.*

The advice was almost insulting. There she'd been, wasting away under her own hopeless desire, her heart rendered too weak in her chest to keep up with circulation. It had been dissolving away bit by bit as her addiction deepened, and by that point Roshan's contempt for her self-imposed helplessness had vitrified into a prickly, fragile cage, a veil of glass he just wanted to shatter and be done with it.

She hadn't been fazed. She never had. And to this day he doesn't know if the woman who had been smiling at him and stroking his hair on her deathbed was his mother or the insipid fairy she turned into when under the influence.

At some point, her hand had stilled. She'd dropped it to his heart. For some reason, Roshan had caught it and held it there.

Her eyes fluttered. Already the glassiness of death was sinking in at the edges. "Let love be the cure, my darling. Don't let your resentment break your heart."

Roshan felt a jolt of alarm and sat up straight, eyes wide. "The cure for *what*—?!"

But she was already gone. Her hand went limp in his, dropping from his heart.

He hadn't even known. Not right away, anyway. At first, he'd chalked up the fact he was always cold in the house to a cold nature, something that went away anytime he was moving, which was often. He was still learning to wield darkness, still strengthening and learning to control his own power. Still developing the very first vestiges of what would eventually be a reputation.

And then his temper had quickened. And quickened more. The slightest things would set him off if he wasn't paying attention—a few decades in, he'd sliced one of Sarimanoc's girls clean in half with the cut when she'd touched his sleeve at the lake house, an incident which had gotten him banned and had required extensive memory alteration so the girls wouldn't remain traumatized. After knocking the remaining girls unconscious, Sarimanoc had spent all night with webs tethered to their foreheads while he unwound the damage of that one moment from their minds and bodies.

"The body remembers, Roshan," Sarimanoc had snapped when Roshan had seen him the next day, Sarimanoc shoving images into Roshan's mind of the damage. "It remembers *far* more than your angry little head, so get that through yours and *control your temper.*"

So he had. It had taken time for him to understand that the darkness collecting within him was different than the darkness that was his family birthright. The darkness he *summons* is nothingness, the great scatterer. The dark star.

What was inside Roshan was not nothingness. It had form and substance, and it stiffened his muscles and bones with deeper and deeper cold the longer it was allowed to collect. He had to

continually purge it, otherwise he'd feel like it was freezing him from the inside, turning him to stone. And there was no escaping it. No respite. Only the cold and the dark.

Eventually, he'd learned to wield it. He'd learned the tricks of the mind that the Unmaking made possible, learned to change form. Learned that the darkness was hungry and that it had a very particular appetite. Learned how to instill fear; learned how to keep it fed.

And all of that in this place. A sea of swirling darkness roils beneath the lip of the gorge as Roshan looks down into its depths, knowing full well he can't see the bottom. Tongues and hands and coils of what could almost be black flame, mouths open and eyes nothing but pits of darkness.

You failed, the darkness says.

It comes from everywhere. A million whispers inside and around and below him, like he's inside them. Like they're inside *him.* His skin hums uncomfortably.

"I know," Roshan answers.

You could not resist.

"I *know.*"

You're just like your mother—

"*—I know!!*"

Roshan shouts. His voice carries in the emptiness, echoing everywhere but the darkness. There, it's instantly silenced.

—and your father, the darkness finishes.

This stops Roshan in his tracks.

"*What?!*"

Roshan hisses the word through gritted teeth as the darkness begins to climb the walls of the Rip.

Look.

A flaming tongue of darkness strikes Roshan's face, and then he sees.

The girl. The little summoner girl who'd been brought to them. She'd been brought to Ulan's mother's school, specifically, where her acolytes instructed the young witches fortunate enough to be accepted in the art of elemental magic. The girl had no family, had been found wandering in a rice field with a little ball of sunlight in her hand.

"Leave her with me," Ulan's mother had said. "I know what to do with strays."

And she had. Roshan had long since become scarce around the Kham Luk house by then, having taken to wandering distant lands in search of a cure. So he'd missed much of the day-to-day of the girl's upbringing, only dimly aware that her magic was similar in nature to the family magic and that Ulan and his mother had taken an interest in teaching her.

Roshan had left for years, then. When he'd finally come back, there was an artificer at the house building an elaborate set of doors for some inane reason, and Roshan had gone down to

find the girl, now young woman, sitting on the stairs in a yellow dress while she watched the artificer at work, using her magic to help him trace what Roshan now knows to be the inner mechanisms of the doors that only the family magic can open.

And then he'd left again. The next time he returned, Ulan's mother was dead, his uncle had been stripped of his birthright, and the young summoner woman was gone.

The darkness passes out of him. The image of the young woman summoning a ball of light as though snatching a fly out of the air does not.

Because the woman looks just like Hiraya. Same straight nose, same high cheekbones, same clever eyes that know far too much at her young age. Her fingers even curl around the sunlight the same way as Hiraya's.

And she lives under the same roof as him in the first door on the left off the stairwell, her eyes as lifeless as a grave.

Roshan claws at his chest, his nails piercing skin as a long, broken sound comes out of his mouth.

It burns. The skin burns where it's torn, the black blood dripping down his chest nearly indistinguishable from his marks. If he could rip that sunlight out of his chest just to hold it in his hands again, he would.

"It's too late," he says to no one.

How *wrong* he'd been. In the witching hours of that very morning, he'd heard his mother's voice and recoiled from Hiraya, panicked. He'd seen what love had done to his mother,

had sworn to never love. Only now did he realize her true, twisted genius, a fortune-teller to the end.

Because Hiraya. Beautiful, brilliant Hiraya, with her ironclad sense of duty and spine made of steel. Her—not fearlessness, but bravery. Her goodness. Her *light.*

Roshan *had* that. He'd held it in the palm of his hand, a tiny, shimmering star, and at the first sign of love he bolted. So unwilling was he to become his mother that he thwarted himself at the first wrong turn. He erased Hiraya's memory. He *turned himself into her enemy,* squandering his one chance to be rid of this curse.

The tides had turned decisively last night. And Roshan, in his infinite foolishness, had turned them right back.

Roshan lowers his head. His thick black tears are coming freely now, each squeezed from his eyes like blood from stone, some stinging the still-open wounds in his chest. For brief seconds, they hiss and burn when they mix with his blood.

"I can't survive this," he whispers.

Welcome back, oh sleeping dreamer.

"I'm not the one in the riddle."

What always is nowhere when shadows are gone?

You know the answer.

You've seen it.

You've held it.

“It doesn’t matter, there’s *nothing left!*”

WRONG.

The word is a thunderclap that rings out through the gorge. Roshan feels it stir around him, the dark horror that’s taken up space inside him all these centuries, palpable now like fingers made of wind or smoke. They caress his face, stir his hair, tendrils of darkness so absolute no light can escape them. Where the wisps of it float in the air, it’s as though the world around him has been erased.

There is no need for shadow when there is no light.

He’s been fighting the darkness the entire time he’s coexisted with it, continually purging it so it didn’t build up to critical levels in his body and freeze him from the inside. He’d had to, he thought—the body is not meant to wield two forms of magic.

The darkness seems to laugh.

Oh, dreamer. Look again.

Image after image flashes in front of him, almost too quick to count—the many, *many* times he’s tried to use magic and been unable since he’d been hexed. The frustration of not being able to summon darkness, to have to run to Hiraya every time he needs to do something as simple as the collection they’d done that very afternoon. One he’d returned from empty-handed, now that he thinks about it, which makes him laugh once, bitterly.

A sorcerer's core of magic is different than a witch's. A witch's magic is creativity itself; when that wellspring is shut by a turn to sorcery, the only source of magic is found in what already exists. In the stirring wind, in the daylight, in the desires of the human heart. The most powerful sorcerers are those most adept at finding places from which to draw that energy.

With the hex suppressing his casting, he is unable to draw. His meridians are closed, and the dark resentment that his heart has churned with since his mother cursed him on her deathbed has had no means of escape.

But with his own magic dormant, his body *cannot* wield two forms. There's no conflict. His meridians are clear—what's more, they've been *scourged,* practically been made new.

Could it really be this simple…?

The darkness stirs again. Fingers of wind and smoke become hands, arms, faceless bodies circling him like acolytes, pulling his shoulders back and guiding him to sit up straight. When he feels something like pressure beneath his chin, he looks up into something that could almost be a face, features shifting in the smoke. It almost seems to smile.

Let me in, it says.

His heart cracks, and the darkness comes in.

He feels the darkness seeping into him like blood through an artery, so cold it burns him from the inside. Bit by bit it squeezes itself into Roshan's meridians, so recently cleansed, from the smallest, most delicate lines nearest the skin until it's seeped into his hands, through the ligaments and tendons and

bone and scarce muscle. Up his wrists, then into his arms and shoulders. Like it's pulling him in.

Because it is. The darkness is greedy, all hands and mouths open and ready to devour. Utter blackness, only forming shapes in the light it swallows like a wave swallows the sea, leaving it bare of life.

The figure in front of him opens its mouth as if to speak.

You feel her.

"Yes."

The last of the sunlight is still in Roshan's chest, pulsing along with his heart. Again, the figure smiles.

Take her.

Remake her in your image.

"She'll burn you."

The figure brings a second hand to Roshan's face, seems to bend down to face him.

Take her.

Suffocate the light in her.

Everyone he loves has abandoned her.

"I want her."

Take her.

Own her.

She belongs to you.

“Body and soul.”

A feeling like a blade of darkness lances through the center of Roshan’s chest. Roshan gasps in pain as the clawlike thing emerges with Hiraya’s sunlight speared through its tip, struggling to glow amidst the suffocating dark as the fingers of wind and smoke make for it like swarming insects to *feed.*

And before Roshan can scream, the dark thing in front of him bends like a snake and slithers into his mouth.

Dark is the day.

Dark is the dawn.

What always is nowhere when shadows are gone?

The Black Wolf howls.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hiraya slept fitfully the night of the job. She'd awoken with the metal-on-metal sound of Roshan drawing *Pricha* from her backsheath in her ears, the faint hum of the light around the blade buzzing in her hands like it had been her holding the sword rather than Roshan. Drained and unmoored, she hadn't wanted to be alone—but she also didn't want to talk to anyone. Fortunately, there was somewhere she could go that suited his mood. She just couldn't get in there alone, lacking the dark magic, so Pelamo had let her in before he'd gone off to do whatever he was doing.

The sun is warm through her mother's windows. They're almost always open when she comes, the light soft and pale with the mid-morning hour. The sky is always blue, interrupted only by wispy clouds overhead, the breeze just enough to stir the ends of her mother's hair and the bottom of her robes as she paints.

Hiraya has tried many times to figure out where on the grounds her windows face, but to no avail. Nowhere she's found has shown her any other view of his mother's garden. It's like it only exists through her window—and yet, when they visit, her familiar can come and go through the window like it would anywhere else. More than once she's found his mother smiling wistfully at the falcon while it's perched on the top of the open frame, watching smaller birds and insects milling around the riotous rows of flowers.

That's where they are now. Hiraya is sitting on the window seat, fingers twirling idly around the thin blades of some kind of grass that's somehow both sturdy enough to grow tall and as soft as an infant's hair. When it starts to change color in her

fingers, leaving some kind of powdery residue on them, Hiraya looks up to see her mother watching her.

She never speaks. This is the closest she ever comes to it. Whatever this language is, Hiraya doesn't understand it, but sometimes she pretends to.

"What is this?"

She holds up her fingers. The tips are reddish now with whatever the grass is leaving on her.

Something like mischief flashes in her mother's eyes. Only for a beat, though. Then she goes back to painting, and a few beats later the blades of the grass turn verdant green.

There's rhythm to her movements that seems almost unnatural, sometimes. Hiraya has stood behind her while she paints and watched her paint a bough of frangipani in a planter opposite the windowsill with mathematical precision, all five petals of each flower equally sized and spaced around a color gradient ranging from near-white at the edges to pale yellow, sunset orange, and finally almost burgundy at the center. They were so perfect, both on the canvas and outside the window, that she'd been tempted to take one of the flowers with her to study it with a protractor and her father's book of ratios.

The next time she'd visited, two cassia trees laden with golden flowers hung like garlands over a bed of chan daeng and pandan and pothos vines. There's always a lot of yellow in the garden no matter what's in it.

"Mae," she says. Her brushstrokes skip for a second, then resume. "Why did Arawan tell me not to come?"

Hiraya lets silence fall. Her mother's strokes don't still, her expression doesn't change, and she gives no indication of having heard her. She doesn't even shift in her seat.

"Was he trying to keep you a secret?"

Now her brushstrokes do still. Just for a beat. She's looking at the solid canvas in front of her like she can see through it, like it's the canvas rather than the window Hiraya is sitting in that opens up to the outside world. She blinks at it.

Then her hand keeps moving. Hiraya allows herself a sigh.

That's the closest it ever comes. She's never acknowledged Hiraya, not really, though there are times Hiraya wonders if she knows she means her when he calls her *mae.*

Hiraya closes her eyes, sends her awareness outward. The edges of her mother's mind are smooth and glassy, like the surface of still water, and she slips into it easily, carefully modulating her breathing.

This is safe with her. As safe as mindwork can ever be, anyway. It's hard to compel someone who doesn't have a will. Her mind is soft and pliant, putting up so little resistance Hiraya wonders if she even knows she's there.

Still, she's careful. She moves slowly, a deer through the understory of a forest at dusk, always on the lookout for predators. There are none of those in her mother's mind, no jump scares lurking around a corner. No anything, really. It's a little bit like walking through a cloud.

No one knows she's doing this. Not even Pelamo. Pelamo doesn't ask questions when he lets Hiraya into the room, though Hiraya knows Pelamo's tells by now and she knows that *he* knows that whatever Hiraya does in there is something she probably shouldn't be doing. But he doesn't press, and secretly, Hiraya thinks Pelamo might even approve of her rebellious streak.

There are ghosts of memories in her mother's mind. She'd gotten the idea to try this in the first place when she was still working on the *curiosum* theory, the idea of somehow using the essence of the *Identify* spell in inverse. It hadn't worked—*Identify* can only locate things that exist, not things that don't. But could it identify an absence if there was any hint of presence left?

Her mother had once had memories. If she'd lost them, Hiraya thought, then maybe they left some kind of imprint behind before they were scourged away.

They did, as it turns out. Memories leave residue. Even in a mind as smooth and glassy as her mother's, the shape the memories had once taken is a bit like a casting mold, though it's hard to tell the definite form of whatever was once in them. These things she finds are static, too. But when she's had time to linger, she's identified patterns and objects that were meaningful to her once, some of which were even things Hiraya knew like her own name.

The necklace. Her father's samsai. The shape and texture of various phoenix bones, the feel of her father's artificer's tools in her hands. The pages of her spellbooks.

Her mother won't ever remember these things. It's like what Hiraya has worked out of Roshan's casting—there's a broken link. The memories, at least the echoes of them, are still there, but she's lost the ability to remember.

Hiraya wanders for a while. There isn't a lot left that she recognizes, and the place where her memories were stored is so pale and flat that it's hard to tell one place from another. Everything feels the same.

She lets her awareness drift as far as she dares. She slips into her mother's body, just enough to feel where she's directing the movements of her hands. Wonders if she would be able to move them for her without violating her will.

It's too dangerous, though. Even the thought is dangerous. In real compulsion, if the person detects that you're trying to compel them, that itself is compulsion if they resist even the smallest bit, and a step that slight is enough to force a turn to sorcery. And once that line is crossed, it can never be reversed, which is why the number of witches who practice mind magic is so extraordinarily small.

Carefully, Hiraya backs out of her body, pulling her awareness out in step with the faint, steady flow of her magic back toward her core. Even her magic is grey now, not just her aura, though it's the soft, gentle grey of a gathering spring raincloud as opposed to a thunderhead or heavy monsoon.

Hiraya is wearing her falconer's band on her forearm, since it's too warm to comfortably wear her jacket. She holds her arm out for her familiar as she stands off the window and leaves, looking both ways down the hall before slipping carefully out of her mother's room and vanishing back to her own.

She can't vanish inside her mother's room. That's something else she's learned. And given that she lives behind a door only a member of the family can open, Hiraya is mostly sure that it's to keep intruders out rather than to keep her mother in.

The falcon flies up to one of its perches as soon as the door closes behind them. It's been more anxious than usual ever since it was taken, not that Hiraya can blame the bird. This place isn't safe, and its preferred perch is one where it can see most of the bedroom as well as Hiraya's entire makeshift lab, which is becoming less and less makeshift the longer she stays.

Hiraya wonders what it would be like to practice on someone who *does* have a will as she prepares her workstation for the day. The person would have to be someone who trusts Hiraya absolutely, for they would not only have to give, but *maintain* their consent actively while she looked inside their mind in order to keep her from an accidental turn. And that's a tall order, one she doesn't even think Arawan can meet.

But before Hiraya can even set up her tabletop still, she hears the door slam open behind her. Hiraya stiffens, already bracing herself, glancing at the falcon, who's watching Roshan storm in like a—well.

Hiraya hears her familiar squawk at her in what Hiraya thinks is indignation merely a split second before her knees hit the floor and Roshan's hand is at her throat, so cold it burns Hiraya's skin. The falcon clicks repeatedly at Roshan in warning, and for a second Hiraya thinks it's about to move to intervene when the warning cuts abruptly and the falcon is frozen in place on its perch with a single look.

Hiraya claws at Roshan's hand, trying to get him off. It's no use. He freezes Hiraya in place, though when Hiraya instinctively growls at Roshan she finds she can still speak when the sound makes it out of his mouth.

"What happened to our agreement?!"

When he wants something Hiraya doesn't owe him, he *asks.* Surprisingly, until now it hasn't been an issue—Roshan *has* been asking, albeit in his gruff, pushy way.

Roshan smirks above him now, predatory and menacing. "Ah, yes, the one where you owe me a life debt?" Hiraya is about to bite back a retort when she finds her tongue paralyzed. "Your life is mine to do with as I please until you pay it. And I came to get you for a job, but if you're so intent on running your mouth—"

The next blink, Roshan's thumb is in Hiraya's mouth, prying her teeth open, his hand so cold Hiraya half expects his tongue to freeze to it. When she instinctively moves her tongue to prevent this from happening, Roshan's smirk turns into a grin.

"That eager, are you?"

He's stroking himself off under his waistband, his robes parted just enough for Hiraya to see a strip of marked skin just below the crest of his hip. When she glares and tries to bite Roshan, though, she finds she can't. A growl of frustration wells up in her throat with nowhere to go. She can't speak anymore, either.

She tries to move. First her arms, to push up off the floor, then her legs and torso to twist free—neither works. Something like

the feeling of a reverberating gong echoes through her body as she thrashes against the paralysis, trying to break it.

Roshan huffs a laugh. The sound of him stroking himself off is wet now, almost thick. He presses down on Hiraya's tongue, forcing Hiraya's mouth open wider, and the next beat his hard, freezing cock replaces his tongue and Roshan is shoving himself down Hiraya's throat.

Hiraya gags. Roshan hasn't shut off her gag reflex this time, and she chokes and sputters and gasps for breath around Roshan's cock, struggling for breath and trying not to vomit while Roshan grips her throat with one hand and the back of her head with the other, holding her still.

Hiraya's vision swims. She can't breathe. Her throat is burning and feels like it's made of metal. The room starts to swim for a second—

Air floods back into Hiraya's lungs so fast it takes her a long beat to realize Roshan is still fucking her throat. But apparently watching Hiraya sputter and choke for breath stopped being fun when he realized Hiraya was about to pass out, because Roshan *has* shut off her gag reflex now, and for several minutes that feel like lifetimes Hiraya fights for each breath like she's fighting for her life, blocking out everything else she can. She can't block out the thick slide of Roshan's cock down her throat. Roshan is using her and Hiraya's mind *burns* with anger as tears stream out of her eyes.

Roshan lets go of Hiraya's gag reflex before he comes, overwhelming them both when he doesn't pull out quickly enough and staggers back when Hiraya wrests herself free at

the moment of Roshan's release, choking and gagging herself as she stumbles toward her sword.

It's like ash. Like death. No salt. She coughs into the back of her hand and the substance that lands on the back is so black it leaves a stain when she wipes off her lips and chin, then another on the floor when she grimaces and spits the black bile from her mouth.

What the fuck. What the *fuck,* has it always been like that?! Is that why she's always felt sick after Roshan came to him?!

Roshan doesn't seem surprised at all. Because of course he isn't, why would Roshan have any qualms whatsoever about potentially poisoning Hiraya—

You understand transmutation, says a mocking voice in his head. *Just get rid of it.*

Before Hiraya can even begin to process how, though, Roshan's hand closes around Hiraya's wrist and he's clawing open a portal, dragging Hiraya through.

Hiraya's wrist burns with the cold of Roshan's grip as he hauls her forward along a paved brick path to the base of a grand set of dark stone stairs. The place looks to be several pagodas arranged along the side of a hilltop overlooking rolling green hills as far as the eye can see, the roofs tall and pointed like tiered spear tips emerging from beneath the ground around twelve-sided buildings of brown or lavender stone.

Roshan pulls Hiraya up the stairs, trailing huge wisps of dark resentful energy as he goes. The energy feels like something

between mist and ash and is so cold it stings his bare skin almost as much as Roshan's grip.

People scatter along the paths ahead of Roshan as he hauls Hiraya past the first building, then the second, following some pattern of walkways that's lost on her. They're in the north somewhere—that's all she knows, high up enough that the breeze attempting to dispel the resentful energy gathering around them is itself cool, though even that is a welcome respite from the unnatural chill of Roshan's physical presence.

Roshan blows a set of double doors wide open on a gust of wind with barely a flick of his wrist, and Hiraya's stomach drops through her feet at the sight of rows of children who can't be older than ten sitting on floor pillows tucked between long wooden desks, each with a wide sheaf of paper open flat across the table.

What *is* this place? Hiraya knows better than to ask, though the fact she wasn't able to gasp in shock suggests Roshan has frozen her mouth again.

The man at the room does not look surprised. It's impossible to guess a powerful magic user's age by looking at them, and whoever this man is has steel grey hair and a lined, weathered face and an aura of rich violet so wide and dark Hiraya is surprised the room doesn't glow purple with it. A charms witch, probably from the Jiang School if she had to guess. He has the same straight nose, narrow face, and high cheekbones of most of Hiraya's classmates in the north.

And whoever he is, he still doesn't flinch when Roshan drops Hiraya's wrist and strides up to him, trailing enough lingering

resentment that the children nearest him gasp and shrink away as Roshan takes their teacher by the throat.

“How auspicious to have finally found you, *Ajarn Nukthee Kananpraya*.” The title and name drip with contempt out of Roshan’s mouth. The man’s skin is turning red under Roshan’s cold grip, but Hiraya isn’t even sure she’s seen the man blink. “All these years in a borrowed face—does your family know where you are?”

Hiraya expects to see fear, hatred, *any* sign of emotion on the man’s face. There is nothing. Instead, the man raises his hand to Roshan’s and a shock of static electricity so strong it sparks white has Roshan ripping his hand free in an instant.

Most of the children have abandoned their desks. Some are huddled together in twos and threes, others moving slowly toward the door like they’re being watched by a tiger. They’re all dressed in uniforms of grey, brown, and lavender, the colors of the pagodas, almost like they’re meant to camouflage with it.

“Class is dismissed. Go to the safe house. Quietly.”

“I don’t think so,” Roshan says.

His voice is low. Menacing. But he’s smirking, unconcerned enough that he’s taken his eyes off the teacher and is looking around the room of children. And before any of them can make it to the door, Roshan opens his mouth and Hiraya watches in stunned silence as a coil of dark energy emerges from his throat like a snake, then dissipates into the room, slamming all the doors and windows shut.

The energy lines the baseboards of the room like a pitch seal, so dark and impenetrable Hiraya can't see any light at all filtering in from outside. The children don't speak—they've probably been told not to in class and are fearful of breaking that rule even now—but some are crying and whimpering and Hiraya has had enough of this. Whatever this is, this is too far.

"Watch my good little amplifier obey me without question," Roshan says. "Hiraya, come here."

Hiraya starts to move toward Roshan even without the command, mouth open to yell at him, when suddenly her rushed gait slows to a calm and measured walk without her accord.

What the *fuck—?!*

Roshan laughs. The sound makes Hiraya's skin crawl with unease. "All these years—you never change, do you? Never get clever or *wise*. What do you think you're doing here, trying to find a *key?*"

Hiraya has no idea what Roshan is talking about. She wants to scream, to cast—she's not sure what she could do, her store of offensive magic is alchemical and she doesn't have her kit, and she's barely enough of a summoner to light up a dark room—but she has to do *something.* Whatever this is, these kids have *nothing* to do with it—

Rohan snarls in her mind.

Wrong.

Hiraya looks at the teacher. Suddenly Hiraya realizes why he hasn't attacked Roshan—Roshan has frozen him too. But for the sake of the children, he's being careful not to give it away.

The man looks at Hiraya. There's something in his eyes, a flash.

Recognition, Hiraya realizes.

She's not sure how she knows. She's not sure *what s*he knows, either, but she gets her answer when all of a sudden there's an overwhelming white mist at the front of her mind that's speaking with a voice Hiraya *knows,* though she doesn't know how she knows it—

My daughter, says the voice.

'WHAT—?!'

Hiraya nearly shouts. *Nearly,* because her voice won't work, just like she staggers back instinctively, but also doesn't, because Roshan is still controlling her body. *Somehow,* even though they're not touching—

He has given himself over to the darkness, the voice in his head says again.

It's *not* her father's voice. Hiraya would never forget her father's voice. But still, this voice is *familiar* and Hiraya can't place it—

Let me in, I will show you everything—!

Absolutely not, Roshan's voice snarls in his head.

The white mist dissipates. The man looks almost aggrieved now, also like he's straining to get through to Hiraya despite Roshan's hold. Hiraya has *no idea how she knows this.*

Roshan holds out his hand, looks at Hiraya expectantly. Hiraya's hand has lifted without her accord and Roshan's fingers thread through her own and he pulls Hiraya close, then closer, then draws Hiraya in by the waist and tips her face up to kiss her.

It's wrong. It's *all* wrong. They've never done this before—this was a line of intimacy Roshan didn't want to cross, and Hiraya had never objected to that. Now though, Roshan's kiss is open-mouthed as he bites her lip, then holds her still as he sends a second snake of dark, resentful energy straight into Hiraya's mouth.

He lets Hiraya go but keeps her hand. Hiraya is shivering now, deep, burning cold as the *wrongness* of the resentful energy seeps into her, dark fingers trailing along her meridians and making her magic feel frozen in place. Roshan is grinning now, wild and feral as he tips her chin up, his eyes lancing into her like the claws of an animal.

"Good girl," he says. "Now ruin them all."

And then Hiraya feels the air punched out of her lungs as her hands spread and a *torrent* of resentful energy floods through her and out her extended hands, and Hiraya sees the two clouds take the shape of wolves as they run straight through the children, then the teacher, then explode out of the sealed doors with a great, splintering *crack,* and Hiraya turns to see what must be three dozen bodies turned to crumbling sculptures of sand where they stand, some already disintegrating in the wind in the wolves' wake.

Hiraya screams. She screams and screams and screams, stopping only when her lungs feel like sandpaper and she looks down to see Roshan on the ground at her feet, resentful energy still wisping over his body like tongues of fire.

His body, which is pale as a corpse.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Many years ago, a young girl was found wandering in a rice paddy with a ball of sunlight in her palm.

She was ankle-deep in the water. It trailed up the dress she wore, which was so dirty by then it was hard to tell what color it was. Her hair was matted, her eyes sallow, her skin burnt and peeling at the shoulders. Her feet were bare.

She didn't know where she was, didn't know how she'd gotten there. Didn't even know her name. In fact, no one did at first, not even after she was found by the elemental sorcerer woman tilling the fields.

The sorcerer lived there alone, an outcast from her village after an accidental turn, and she couldn't take care of the girl herself. But she knew someone who could, and she'd gently searched the girl's mind for as much information as she could gather when it became clear the girl wouldn't, or *couldn't,* volunteer it herself.

The girl held her light close to her chest. She wouldn't lower her hands. When the sorcerer tried, the girl had screamed until she let go.

The sorcerer didn't trust the villagers to care for her, though. She knew any child associated with her would be viewed with suspicion. So for wont of anything else to do, the sorcerer brought the girl to her own teacher.

"Leave her with me," her teacher had said. "I know what to do with strays."

Summoners are rare. Any witch can be taught elemental magic, but the ones with the truest talent for the manipulation of matter are born, not made. What's more, most witches of any kind are usually within a few years of puberty before their magic begins to stir.

This girl was far younger. Not yet five, Ulan's mother had guessed, based on how small she was. And with nowhere else to go, she stayed with her teacher, learning alongside her other students.

Her teacher's son taught her too. Like the girl, her teacher's son was both a summoner and an elemental. The only difference between them, aside from their age, was that her teacher's son summoned darkness rather than light. But really, they weren't so different.

"Darkness is absence, not presence," he had explained to her once, several years after she'd arrived at Kham Luk. "The great scatterer. To say I *summon* it is a bit of a misnomer."

She'd frowned at this, trying to understand. "It's like silence, then? You don't make silence, you get rid of noise."

"Exactly."

"So then light is…what?"

He didn't know, nor did anyone else at the house, so the girl hadn't gotten her answer then. Instead, she grew up, coming of age into the fuller expression of her magic just as whispers started to resound around Kham Luk about whether she was to turn.

Because there were other rumors too. Rumors about a betrothal to her foster uncle's younger brother, a sorcerer known as the Chameleon who was able to change his appearance at will. Like all of her foster uncle's blood relatives, his brother could summon darkness, and he'd taken an interest in the girl when he'd learned about her unique summoning power.

And he'd seemed nice enough when she'd met him. The first time they met, she was sixteen. She'd been sitting in an open window in the library that dropped straight down to the sea, reading in the dying sunlight, when her intended had joined her along with her uncle. The man was handsome, casually dressed in linen shirt and trousers with a knotted scarf around his neck, his features sharper than his brother's, and he'd laughed when the first thing she'd asked was if that was his real face. She'd been surprised by how much younger than her uncle he was.

His eyes, though. She'd remembered his eyes, how there was something hard and unsettling beneath his easy demeanor. Something that made her not quite trust him.

She hadn't seen him again after that, not for some time, though they'd begun exchanging letters. But she wrote a lot of letters, especially to her former classmates. Those letters were her window into the world outside Kham Luk.

Things changed with the arrival of a master artificer from the Jiang School in the north. Quiet and diligent, the young man had been commissioned to build a set of a dozen doors only the family magic could open, and he had knowledge that no one else in the family did, not even the library.

When the girl, now young woman, had asked him about the light, she'd finally gotten an answer.

"Electromagnetic radiation that can be perceived by the human eye," he'd said easily, without looking up from his work. And when he'd looked up to the young woman blinking at him on the steps with a ball of sunlight in her hand, he'd smiled and clarified, "but what you have there is a collection of photons. They're both particles and waves, and they carry the electromagnetic force that results in visible light. And other forms of radiation."

"What does that mean?"

Her brows were drawn down in a sharp V as she stared into the ball of light in her hand.

"Which part?" He'd asked.

(Later, when asked, the artificer would recount that that had been the moment he'd fallen in love with her.)

"…All of it," she'd admitted, sheepish. "I guess, start with the first thing?"

So he had. They'd talked for hours as he worked, first about science, then about—well. Everything. So long that when she'd stood up again to stretch and her stomach had rumbled loudly, she'd looked out the window to see it was well after dark outside.

And that was just the beginning. She'd helped him build the doors, a task that had become much quicker and easier with the young woman's magic at hand, a perfect foil to the

darkness. But they couldn't seem to stay apart. When they weren't working, they were often in the library, where the artificer plied the young woman's curious mind with physics and science and the *how* of magic, or by the sea, where the young woman taught the artificer things she had taught herself, like to predict the weather using the wind and patterns in the clouds and waves.

And when they were done, she'd informed the Dragon of Kham Luk and the rest of the family that she intended to leave with the artificer when he departed.

"He's recommended me for admission to the Jiang School," she'd said, looking around the table at several very different expressions. "To study charms."

"When would you leave?" The Dragon's wife, her teacher, had asked.

"Wan suk," the young woman answered.

"So soon?"

Two days from then. The young woman smiled, both deferential and a bit sad, but she didn't deny it.

The Dragon was looking at her across the table. He took a drink, then set his glass down again. "Stay until Sat Thai," he said. "I will write Jiang Shuifeng and let him know you will begin late. And Min Xiaoyu as well, since you intend to study charms. She is a stern teacher."

And then he'd tucked into his gaeng som again, ending the discussion.

Something uneasy had stirred in her gut, then. That Suhat knew those two names when even she hadn't known them didn't seem quite right. And anyway, why wait? The festival was over a month away. Why not allow her to leave with the artificer so she could get settled in in her new home?

What the answer was, the young woman would never know. A few days before the festival, long after the artificer had left Kham Luk, the Dragon's brother arrived with an entourage of his whole side of the family, including guards, servants, spirits, and a massive snake that made the young woman deeply uneasy every time she saw it. She'd never been afraid of snakes, but there was something about this one that wasn't quite right. Like it knew too much; like it was almost human.

Sat Thai was a harvest festival, an important time of the year for the family, a time when surrounding villages and towns made merit and honored their ancestors. A time when the ones who still believed in the old gods paid their tribute to her teacher and her son for helping to secure their good fortune for another year. And that year, the night of the new moon, it was also something else.

The night began as a formal dinner between the two halves of the family. The young woman arrived to it suspicious—she hadn't seen her intended in years, and she'd feared the reason she had not been allowed to leave with the artificer had been related to her betrothal. But she'd been told to pack her things and prepare to leave that night, and to make sure she had gathered everything valuable that she wanted to bring with her from Kham Luk.

When the subject of the betrothal was raised, the young woman felt a flame of hope snuffed out in her chest. But then something unexpected had happened. When the Chameleon asked for the young woman's hand, the Dragon refused.

And then the Chameleon attacked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Roshan wakes up to a very angry Hiraya tending to his wounds.

They're in Roshan's chambers. Roshan is laying at one side of his bed, stripped to the waist and simultaneously freezing and burning from the inside where Hiraya's magic courses through him.

"He's awake," he hears Sarimanoc say before he opens his eyes.

There's something at his temples. Something sticky. Roshan starts to raise a hand to touch one side and when he does, it feels like he's trying to pull his arm through thick mud.

He's exhausted. He can't remember the last time he was this tired. The heaviness feels like it's coming from inside him rather than pressing down on him, like his body itself is made of something too heavy to lift.

He looks around. There's a shallow dish of white salt on the side table along with an empty cup and a plate of half-eaten food. Hiraya and Sarimanoc are the only people in the room, and it looks like Hiraya's alchemy kit is spread out along one side of his credenza.

Sarimanoc is sitting at the edge of the bed on the far side. He's holding a set of purple webs in one hand like a horse's reins, each of them so thick they look like tendons. When Roshan follows the line of them up, he sees they're anchored to a catch point in the ceiling, which is also covered nearly all the way across with Sarimanoc's webs.

“Toti is helping too,” Sarimanoc adds.

There’s acid in his brother’s voice. More than usual. “Helping what?” Roshan manages.

“Helping hold you down,” Sarimanoc snaps. “If you’re wondering why, Roshan, it’s because it’s the fastest way to make sure your bullshit reaches father’s ear with the fewest number of intermediaries, since *stars above* know you’re incapable of speaking to him without seven layers of lies between your throat and your twisted head.”

Sarimanoc’s accusation lands like a slap. He feels Sarimanoc’s satisfaction through the reins at his temples.

“How long,” Roshan croaks.

“Let’s see.” Sarimanoc pretends to consider, thumbing at his chin. “*Bai ha mong,*” he drawls, then looks to Hiraya as though for confirmation. “*Yesterday.* That’s when Hiraya appeared in your room with your lifeless body. *Hok thum* by the time you were no longer leaking black bile from every orifice in your body.”

Despite Hiraya’s magic, Roshan shivers. Far beyond purged, he feels *excavated.* His throat is hoarse and his eyes are so dry that it feels like his eyelids are made of sandpaper. And of course, Sarimanoc isn’t done.

“By the time you were stabilized, little brother? *Thiang wan.* Half a day.”

Roshan’s eyes close on a sigh. That explains why it’s so bright outside—

Wait.

Roshan's eyes fly open again, this time landing properly on the window. There's only one in his bedchamber, all the way over by the door to keep as much of the draft out as possible. Its frame is pale grey limestone set amid wood paneling of deep midnight blue, and it's traces of those tones and the occasional flash of brown or gold that dominate his bedchamber—

Color, Roshan thinks.

Sarimanoc snorts. "Don't get too used to it, puppy. As soon as little Hiraya decides to wash her hands you'll be back to your flat, grey *nothing*."

Hiraya is barely touching him now. She has one hand at the outer edge of Roshan's shoulder, and it's from there that her golden magic is coursing through Roshan like liquid fire. Even in profile, she looks like she hasn't slept in days.

"What's that stuff called? That stuff Ulan used to buy from your brother."

Sarimanoc is talking to Hiraya now. Hiraya huffs through her nose. "Phoenix oil."

"*Phoenix oil.* Cute. What would happen if you were to inject him with it and light it on fire?"

Hiraya winces. "It would depend on how much you used. One *zuo* in a lantern will burn for a week."

A small measure. Barely a drop. Sarimanoc barks a laugh, sharp and shrill in the otherwise near-silence. "*Ha!* Perhaps three *shao* for the children, then?"

Sarimanoc stands abruptly and whirls around. There's a *sharp* tug at Roshan's temples as he does. His eyes are glowing now, the same otherworldly violet as his webs, and Roshan feels rather than sees Hiraya shrink back near his shoulder when Sarimanoc gets closer.

There it is, Roshan thinks. *The center of the web.*

"*What were you thinking, Roshan?!"* Sarimanoc's voice seems like it has physical mass. Roshan hears it *inside* him, sticking to the insides of his ears and reverberating down his body until it feels like he's full of sand beneath the feet of a giant, shaking beneath its steps. "Do you have *any* idea what you've done—"

"Of course I do," Roshan growls.

Sarimanoc slaps him.

It's a good hit, too. Roshan's head whips to the side where it's propped up against a wall of pillows against his headboard, his skin instantly smarting with the sting.

"That is the *least* you deserve," Sarimanoc hisses. "I don't know *what* you've been feeding your monsters in the Rip besides *schoolchildren*, little brother, but they *stick.* You had *no right*."

Roshan narrows his eyes. "I did what father asked."

Something twists in Roshan's head, making him wince and slam his eyes closed. "*Yes, you did.* But *you* know as *well* as I do that there were *not supposed to be casualties.*"

Other casualties, Roshan corrects.

"He's furious with you, you know. If you're feeling a little *charred* on the inside, it's not because of Hiraya. Hiraya saved your miserable life."

Roshan feels a heavy stone of dread start to collect in his gut.

"What did he do," Roshan asks.

It comes out a statement. Sarimanoc huffs a laugh, his eyes hard and mirthless.

"*What did he do*—what do you *think* he did, you *wretched* boy!?"

Roshan's head snaps to the side as he turns to face Hiraya. Hiraya is looking at her hand on Roshan's shoulder like it's about to detach itself from her wrist. She won't meet Roshan's eyes.

There's a flush on her cheeks. But she isn't flustered, Roshan can tell. She's angry, so angry it's burning her up from the inside, and she looks to be physically biting her tongue. And when Roshan sends his awareness into his own body, feeling around his meridians, all he feels is Hiraya, her normally pleasant warmth too hot now. Like sitting too close to a fire.

After a beat, Hiraya nods, barely the slightest movement of her chin. At first Roshan isn't sure why, but the next beat

Sarimanoc exhales a long breath at his other side and sends something through the tethered web.

The feeling hits him first. His body, neither warm nor cool—*not his body,* Roshan realizes. He's looking at his own face from too close, a serpent's smile on other-him's lips as the black end of a tail slides into this-him's—*Hiraya's*—mouth.

It's *cold.* Roshan has known the bone-deep chill of the resentful energy for centuries, but it's different when you're not used to it. For Hiraya, whose body has *not* been so afflicted, the black resentment that floods through her feels like tiny blades of ice, so sharply, piercingly cold she had been shocked to find she *wasn't* standing in a pool of blood when the wolves had materialized from her wrists and started tearing through the school at Dahn Bon Hak, taking all of the life on that mountaintop with them.

And that is just the beginning.

Roshan had awoken before this, he realizes now. He'd awoken in what looked to be a dark cavern underground, so thick were the clouds of black resentment that swirled in the air.

But it wasn't, Roshan realizes. It was the house, this very *room*. Like Sarimanoc said, *somehow,* Hiraya had gotten them back—and that's the last concrete thought Roshan had before the wings of a great black dragon snapped open and *hellfire* poured into his chest, and Roshan screamed as the Dragon of Kham Luk exorcised the dark thing that Roshan had let inside him, sending it fleeing back to the Rip.

"Is it—"

Roshan can barely hear his own voice. Hiraya's hand on his shoulder is trembling, and when Roshan looks at her again, he shakes his head.

"No. Your other curse is—" Hiraya cuts herself off, turns away. She covers her mouth with her hands and it's only then that Roshan sees for the first time that she is crying.

Not just now, either. She looks like she's been crying for hours. Her eyes are red-rimmed and bloodshot when Hiraya looks at him again. "*Why didn't you tell me?!"*

Roshan has no answer to that. Sarimanoc *tsk*s.

"Your cruelty truly knows no bounds, Roshan." He looks like *he's* about to cry now, like he's a parent about to watch their murderous child receive a death sentence. In a way, Roshan supposes he is. "You're in stasis now and you will remain in stasis until you leave this bed. If I were you, I would choose that moment *very* carefully."

And with that, Sarimanoc adheres the two long cords to the wall and seals Roshan's doors and window with full webs, then vanishes out of the room, taking most of the life in it with him.

Hiraya still isn't looking at him. Her hand is still on Roshan's shoulder, barely. The flow of her magic into Roshan feels passive rather than active.

For several long minutes, neither of them speaks. Roshan feels Hiraya's steady breaths through her touch, hears how her inhales and exhales are so even in length that she must be counting seconds. The flush on her face never fades, though.

Like she's modulating rather than suppressing her anger so she doesn't snap.

"You don't have to," Roshan says, his voice raspy and hollowed out. When Hiraya turns, one brow raised, Roshan continues. "Keep touching me. You don't have to."

If he's in stasis, nothing will happen if Hiraya withdraws her hand. Nothing but her warmth leaving Roshan, warmth that somehow no longer feels as hot without Sarimanoc in the room.

"I know."

Hiraya takes a breath, then gets to her feet, bringing the dish of white salt with her.

As soon as she does, Roshan regrets having said anything. There's a hollowness in his chest now, a banked fire. The drafts in his room feel particularly cold.

Roshan's room has never had much in it. As Hiraya makes for the credenza along the wall nearest the window, Roshan sees that what little was on top of it has been pushed halfway down to make room not just for Hiraya's alchemy kit, but also her heating rig, her tabletop still, and a few shallow basins resting on individual rungs of a tiered stand. There's a cutting board with a neat mound of some kind of soft, silver metal with an open switchblade resting beside it; a hand towel that looks like it's been wrung out.

Hiraya stops in front of the credenza. She lets her arms spread as her hands curl around the lip and Roshan watches the rise and fall of her back.

“Is it even worth treating you?”

“What…?” Roshan starts to ask.

He cuts himself off when Hiraya whirls halfway around and fixes Roshan with a glare that could melt steel.

“We both know you can’t hold Arawan over me. Not with him and Ulan thread-bonded. So *why* am I still here, Roshan? I’m not going to be your fucking *amplifier*—”

Hiraya slams her hand on the credenza. A split second later, she hisses in pain, and when she holds her hand up in front of her Roshan sees she’s cut her hand all the way across her palm.

Hiraya looks at the blood for a beat. They both do, watching as it wells up in the hollow of her palm before dripping down the back of her hand. A beat or two later, Hiraya pours something into one of the basins, then something else, then dips the towel in the mixture, wincing as she holds it to her palm.

Again, Roshan watches her breathe. Deep breaths this time as she rides out the pain.

Pain Roshan can purge.

“Come closer,” Roshan says.

Hiraya blinks at him.

Words are failing him. He sends the rest to Hiraya as a thought and a beat later, Hiraya’s face turns stony. “I can handle pain,” she says, her voice a low warning. “Besides, I don’t really want you touching me right now.”

“Hiraya, *please*—”

“*Absolutely not!*”

Roshan’s desperation hovers at the front of his chest. It chokes his throat as he wills Hiraya to come closer, not with compulsion, but with—

Desire.

Want, he realizes.

Need.

Far more than just sex, Roshan *wants* her. Wants her to stay, wants to *belong* to her. He knows it like he knows his own name.

It terrifies him, the depth of this feeling. His desire is a chasm inside him. It’s like he’s burning with it, the flame cold without Hiraya’s touch—but not cold like the darkness. The darkness is an ancient kind of cold, bitter and uncaring, one that aches until the only thing left is pain. No. The cold of his desire is a flash freeze like a lightning strike, sinking its claws deep into Hiraya as though to pull her into itself. To tuck Hiraya into that chasm and never let her go.

He *wants.*

Hiraya scoffs. She isn’t looking at Roshan anymore.

“I’ve had enough, Roshan.” Her voice is quiet, pinched. Roshan doesn’t have to ask what she means. “I’ve thought about it, you know. There’s actually nothing worse you can do to me that

you haven't already done. The only person who would be hurt if I left is you."

Roshan recoils like he's been slapped again.

"What about your mother?"

Hiraya stands up off the credenza. She's furious now, waves of anger rolling off her like molten lava out of a volcano. If Roshan touched her, he'd probably catch fire. "You can't hold her over me either. I've seen—" Hiraya cuts herself off, regroups. "Whatever happened to her can't be fixed."

She's seen—she's *seen what?* Roshan's mind is reeling, but his desperation is louder. The black scabs on his chest pull painfully as he sits forward as though to stand, and even that motion is enough to make him dizzy enough that the room sways like a boat in rough water.

"You would leave her?"

Leave me?

If Hiraya hears the underlying question, she doesn't acknowledge it. Instead, she laughs once, sharp and cold. "Yes. I would. There's no point in taking her with me. Whether I like it or not, she's safer here than anywhere else."

Silence. Roshan is frozen. He's not sure he remembers how to speak, all he knows is the desperation and terror in him are so loud now that they roar in his ears like blood with his suddenly racing heart.

“Something else I’ve realized, Roshan,” Hiraya continues before Roshan can finish gathering his thoughts. A beat, then Hiraya wraps the towel around her hand. Her eyes are boring into Roshan’s like she can see straight into Roshan’s soul. “I’m not stupid. I’ve known almost the whole time I’ve been here that you have nothing to hold over me. You were never forcing me to stay—I stayed because it was the right thing to do.”

Was.

There is no debt anymore. Not after what Roshan had done on the mountaintop, probably since long before. Roshan knows this with fierce, unrelenting certainty, one that turns the terror to dread as the stone in his gut sinks into the bed, then the floor, pulling Roshan down with it.

Hiraya is right. There *is* nothing worse Roshan could do to her that he hasn’t already done. Roshan could spend the rest of whatever will remain of his life once he leaves this room atoning to her and it would never be enough.

So Roshan watches as Hiraya packs up her kit. She puts the silver metal on the cutting board into a container, then does likewise with the contents of each of the shallow dishes on the rack, then the rack itself. Then her heating rig and still, which she disassembles and packs in boxes. Even with an injured hand, she works quickly, stowing things in her component bag as she goes.

When she’s done, she doesn’t turn around. Doesn’t say goodbye. She makes for the door and lays a hand on Sarimanoc’s web, transmuting the sticky purple fibers until they no longer adhere to the wall, just fall to the floor like string.

She could vanish. They both know it. Instead, Hiraya kicks the web free and opens the door, slamming it shut behind her.

The sound reverberates through Roshan's chest for a long time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hiraya goes back to her room on foot, thinking the walk will clear her head. It doesn't. The house is too still, too quiet, like its very stones are holding their breath and huddling together for warmth in the wake of what had come out of Roshan's body.

Hiraya can relate.

She still doesn't know how to make sense of what she'd seen, what she'd *done*. Somehow—Hiraya still doesn't know how, her best guess is some of Roshan's power had somehow come into her body along with the resentful energy Roshan had sent flooding through her, then lingered in the aftermath, augmenting Hiraya's own stores of magic—she'd been able to open a rip powerful enough to get them back to Kham Luk *without her sword,* then had collapsed on the floor of Roshan's chambers almost as soon as her feet had hit the floor.

The last thing she remembers had been Suhat and Sarimanoc standing in the doorway. Toti—who, as far as Hiraya has come to understand, as the diwata of Kham Luk both is and isn't the house itself—must have alerted them somehow. She'd awoken after dark, half in Sarimanoc's lap, sprawled in an enormous chair spun from purple web as he worked some kind of magic Hiraya didn't understand. And there was a protective shield around them while Suhat purged his son of the dark thing he'd let inside him, a process that had taken multiple hours and had left the most powerful sorcerer ever known looking weary down to his bones.

He'd looked…*old.*

He'd met Hiraya's eyes through the protective veil of the shield as dark resentful energy flowed past him like a great river, driven out by wind from Ulan and Arawan. Hiraya had not been able to read the look in his eyes.

And he hadn't stayed. The darkness had not gone quietly. Hiraya's ears were still ringing from the banshee screams it had let loose as it was ripped from Roshan's chest before Sarimanoc had closed them up.

She'd learned everything after that. How each of Suhat's sons had a different mother, how the sisters from the steppes had come to Kham Luk. How Ulan's mother had been the favorite; Roshan's mother's eventual demise.

"What happened to yours?"

Ulan had looked at her as though surprised by the question. It was a guess, sure, but she clearly wasn't here anymore. Rather than answer right away, though, Ulan had looked at Sarimanoc again, this time with a question in his face. Seeking Sarimanoc's advice without speaking. It made him look very young.

"That is…a very long story," he eventually said.

Hiraya had shrugged. "I have time."

So they'd told her. They'd told her about the coup, about her own mother's role in it. About how Pelamo had come to live with them after his father's men had killed Anawing, his consort, who had been a family scribe back when the family still had staff. About what had happened after their uncle's banishment; about the man Roshan, through Hiraya, had killed.

The man who'd called Hiraya *daughter.*

She doesn't remember meeting Atun, just remembers his voice. Her memories supplied the rest: the necklaces her parents had made that only a member of *their* family could remove; Arawan's warning in the letter.

There's darkness around our family, nong. Mae kept us safe as long as she could.

Darkness indeed.

Arawan had long since fallen asleep sitting up on the floor propped against Roshan's credenza, so Hiraya had worked out the rest of the pieces in her own mind as Ulan told the story, Sarimanoc chiming in occasionally. The school had been their uncle's attempt to replicate what Ulan's mother had done: to find another summoner, one who could open the doors and get her mother out, since he no longer had access to the family magic or his sons.

Atun had recognized Hiraya immediately. Roshan hadn't needed Hiraya; with the darkness lending him its power, Roshan had brought Hiraya along on that murderous errand to taunt Atun, then used the daughter of the woman he coveted to kill him and destroy everything he'd built in the wake of the coup.

Knowing who the man had been made Hiraya a little less sorry for him. But the children had nothing to do with it, nor had anyone else on the mountain. The thought of them turned Hiraya's stomach and she'd had to shove the thought away, the well of anger inside her toward Roshan starting to fume and bubble beneath the surface.

“It consumes him,” Ulan had said. “It feeds on his anger. He hasn’t been the same since he was cursed.”

“What was he like before?”

Ulan smiled and looked at Sarimanoc, who huffed where he was still sitting behind Hiraya, though by then Hiraya wasn’t in his lap anymore.

“Precocious. Ambitious,” Sarimanoc answered, fondness creeping into his tone. “Hungry.”

Ulan nodded. “He wanted to make our father proud. To get his approval the way his mother never had.”

“That part only got worse after he was cursed,” Sarimanoc continued, not hiding his disapproval.

Ulan had looked away—had looked at Roshan, still unconscious on the bed, and a minute or two of silence had fallen between them before Ulan continued in a low voice.

“He’s let the curse make him into an attack dog. A weapon. Though he hasn’t made him cruel.” Ulan’s head fell, then, like the burden of his next words fell on his shoulders alone. “Roshan did that on his own.”

Hiraya had dozed after that. Never quite slept, but hovered just far enough beneath the surface that the room around her felt like a dream. When she’d come to again, Ulan and Arawan were gone and Sarimanoc was sitting by Roshan’s bedside with those thick purple webs already at Roshan’s temples, his eyes closed in concentration. By then it was morning, and Hiraya had looked at the bedside table beside her and seen someone had

brought food she had only been able to pick at, despite the fact it had probably been nearly two days since she'd last eaten.

But she tried. For Sarimanoc's sake, who had leveled an older brother look at Hiraya that she had been unable to refuse until she'd finished the herbal tea and started in on the khao tom and filleted daeng keo. As she ate, idly Hiraya wondered if the fish had been caught at all or simply been plucked from the water. That had made Sarimanoc laugh, which, despite the circumstances, had been the first happy sound Hiraya had heard in a while.

She'd finally gone to Roshan, then. Roshan's top half had been stripped to make room for Sarimanoc's webs, but only a few of those were left at that point. Hiraya had sat on a corner of the bed and laid a hand on Roshan's shoulder to start assessing the damage.

She'd nearly flinched. Roshan's skin was cold as a corpse and sticky with dried bile, his breathing shallow. When Hiraya sent her awareness into Roshan's meridians, she found them almost charred by whatever Suhat had done.

But that was the only thing that had changed, at least from the time since before Roshan had let the darkness into himself. Roshan's magic was still there, still dormant, and if Roshan woke up again Hiraya suspected it would be a while before he would be able to cast again even through him.

"He'll wake up," Sarimanoc had said, his voice quiet. "He's a bastard, but he's a fighter. He wouldn't have spent two thirds of his life looking for a cure if he *didn't* want to stay alive."

That was…relieving, somehow. Which had surprised Hiraya. She felt almost like she shouldn't want Roshan to wake up, given everything he'd done.

And yet she did. She'd gone back to her lab briefly to gather her alchemy kit and other supplies and to let her familiar know she was okay, then had returned to Roshan's room and spent the next couple of hours at a makeshift bench, keeping her hands busy distilling hartshorn for sal volatile. The smelling salts were eventually what she'd used to revive Roshan.

Why? Hiraya thinks now as she opens the door to her makeshift lab, slamming it behind her a bit louder than she meant to. Enough that her familiar doesn't just look at Hiraya, it flies over to its perch by Hiraya's main workstation so it can look her in the eyes.

"I can't anymore," Hiraya says. "I *can't.*"

The children hadn't screamed. There had been no chance. Some had died with their mouths open as though to form the sound; perhaps Hiraya had screamed for them.

She sits on the chair at her workstation, head falling into her hands as the tears come freely now. She's grateful for her familiar's eyes on her back.

Hiraya knows, in her head, that it was Roshan who had killed the children. The teacher. Everyone on that mountaintop. But those wolves had come from *her* body. Hiraya was a killer now, a murderer. A murderer in cold blood. Even if she wasn't, he *was.* The stain of that day will never leave her soul.

Why had she stayed? Well. The simplest answer is that in her hubris, she'd thought she could save Roshan.

"I can't," she says again.

She hopes the falcon understands.

× × × × ×

By the time her tears stop, Hiraya's face feels stuffed with cotton. Her head hurts. She feels like she hasn't slept in days. She also has neither the energy nor the will to brew more of her ex's remedy for headaches, so she grits her teeth, standing slowly so the room doesn't spin so much and bracing carefully against the table while she waits for the worst of the pain to pass.

Her hand aches. It throbs under the bandage with every heartbeat, a tangible reminder that these last two days were real and not just figments of a nightmare.

She surveys his makeshift lab. It's significantly less makeshift now. Once-empty bookshelves along two of the walls are now stuffed with books, mostly from the library, though a couple of shelves are entirely taken up by her mother's spellbooks and her father's journals, also the diaries the two of them kept together. On the bottom shelves, she's pulled out all of the storage containers and equipment she'd taken from the house she'd grown up in, even set up stocks of alchemical supplies arranged by molecular formula and use.

The thought of disassembling it all makes Hiraya's head swim. She's *so* tired. Really, she just wants to get out of here.

So she leaves it. She leaves all of it, even her mother's spellbooks. She goes to her closet, changes into clean clothes, and grabs her school jacket, which she leaves on the bed while she goes into the washroom and rinses her face in the sink. She doesn't have the energy to clean off all the way right now.

Once Hiraya shrugs into her school jacket and clips on her backsheath, her familiar hops up to its perch on her shoulder, watching Hiraya thumbing at the fabric in her hands.

She'd brought the embroidered indigo-and-orange phoenix blanket from her parents' bedroom. Her mother had made it, long before she and Arawan were born. She'd brought it with her on the off chance she was ever unable to return to her childhood home, but now—after everything she'd learned about this family, about her own mother—the thought of bringing it with her again is almost unbearable. She needs to *get away.*

So she leaves it. She leaves it folded on the second desk with the phoenix motif facing up. No letter, but Arawan will recognize the symbol and he trusts Arawan to know what to do with it.

Hiraya draws her sword and opens a portal in two strokes, then resheaths *Pricha* at her back and steps through.

She doesn't have the energy to portal far. She gets as far as the port town, her feet touching ground again in the trees a few meters off the dirt roadway that leads to the plateau. And when she touches down, her head swims again and she has to brace a hand against a tree for nearly a full minute before her vision evens out and she can walk again without feeling like she's about to pitch forward into the dust.

She doesn't know where she's going at first. She still isn't hungry, even though she knows she needs to eat, so she stops at a fruit stand, buying and forcing herself to finish a large glass of pandan juice before she moves on with a satchel of cashews and dried mango for the road.

Once she's done, she surveys the town below. The road she's on slopes gently down to the harbor, where she needs to go if she plans on returning home, since she's in no shape to portal that far right now. It doesn't take much thought at all for Hiraya to realize she doesn't want to go home, though, either. Not right now, and probably not anytime in the near future.

So she charters a plane. They're still a fairly new means of travel, not widely trusted yet, and Hiraya finds neither line nor crowd ahead of her when she approaches the pilot, a tall, strikingly handsome man with pale brown curls and a freckled, slightly sunburnt face who introduces himself as Sahar, holding out a gloved hand to Hiraya.

"Is your friend going to be riding or flying with us?"

It takes Hiraya a beat to realize Sahar is talking about the falcon.

"Riding," Hiraya supplies after another beat. "We're both pretty tired."

"Righteous. I get it. You certainly travel light, you on the run somewhere?" It's clearly a joke, though Hiraya's gut still swirls with uneasiness. "Actually, don't answer that. If I'm about to be harboring a fugitive, that's not the most pressing thing I want to know."

Hiraya feels Sahar's appreciative gaze sweep down her body from head to toe, then back to her eyes. He winks.

Despite the day she's had, Hiraya's heartbeat kicks up. Sahar is *very* attractive, and it's been a long time since Hiraya was flirted with like this. It feels…nice.

And anyway, Sahar doesn't linger, just turns back to the plane with a grin once he notices the light flush on Hiraya's face and pops open a panel on one of the sides, pulling out a small artificer's toolkit. "Lanling's far enough that it's going to be a few days to get there," he says, tinkering around behind the panel for a few seconds before reaching into the opening with both hands, apparently fiddling with something in the interior of the plane. "Think you can put up with me for that long?"

Without a better place to go, Hiraya's thought had been that she might as well go back to the Jin School. The next school term will be starting up again soon enough and while Hiraya isn't worried about her academics, she has a fair amount of physical training she needs to pick up with again before she's ready for graduate-level night hunts.

And from what little Hiraya has seen so far, Hiraya isn't going to be *putting up with* Sahar at all. After the company she's had the last few months, Sahar's genuine happiness and affable demeanor is a breath of fresh air. She might even make a friend.

Or something else, Hiraya thinks, eyes lingering appreciatively on Sahar's long legs and tight core now that he's focused elsewhere.

Sahar is humming to himself now as he works, closing up the first panel and moving onto something else toward the rear of the plane. He's probably showing off a bit, Hiraya thinks—though Hiraya can pretty much only see his shins and feet between the biplane's wings and tapered body—but on the other hand, what's the harm in that? Hiraya *does* have a competency kink.

Her familiar clicks at her.

"What? It's fine, there's nothing—"

Her familiar clicks again. Then again.

Hiraya frowns.

The falcon isn't looking at her. It's looking off at something down the road. A beat later, it flies off with a shriek.

"Did your bird go hunting? That's probably a good idea, it might be a while before—"

Whatever Sahar had been about to say, Hiraya will never know. Because the very next beat, the world around her goes black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hiraya wakes up in a room that looks a lot like the grand chamber of the Kham Luk house. The only difference, aside from the size, is that instead of the whole thing looking as though it's been cut from the grey limestone of the cliffs, the stone of the walls and floor is almost purple.

She's seated at one end of a long dining table, her wrists bound to the arms of a high-backed dining chair. Her ankles are bound to the legs, and also to each other.

Whoever took her *really* doesn't want her to run. The restraints are all magical—Hiraya can see traces of bright white magic that almost looks like static electricity buzzing around the ropes. Experimentally, she tugs on one with her right hand, testing it—only to wince and grunt as the restraint tightens further around her wrist.

"What the fuck—?!"

There are footsteps from an adjoining hall. Just one set, though there's another sound, too, like something sliding across the floor.

A beat later, the schoolteacher from the mountaintop walks into the room.

Hiraya blinks, *sure* now that her eyes are deceiving her. "*How?!*"

A gigantic green snake enters the room behind the schoolteacher, its eyes fixed on Hiraya.

Hiraya holds *very* still. The serpent's face is twice the size of its master's, its body ten meters long, maybe more.

The serpent moves past the man and begins making a circuit of the room. Hiraya follows it with her eyes as far as she can, until it passes behind her and out of eyeshot and slows. Hiraya feels every hair on her body stand on end as it comes to a stop right behind her and its long, forked tongue flicks out into the air with a soft *whirr.*

Then again. Hiraya's heart is galloping in her chest. No doubt the serpent knows that.

It keeps moving. Hiraya lets out a huge, audible breath, only remembering the dead man in the room when he crosses in ahead of the serpent and comes to sit against the edge of the table opposite Hiraya. The man looks down at her bound wrists, then meets her eyes.

"While I am disappointed in the loss of my nopperabo, you are worth the sacrifice."

A faceless ghost. A creature that takes on the appearance of others, usually to trap them somewhere. Knowing what she now knows, Hiraya would bet that's exactly what it was for: to lure Roshan in. To trap him, much as Roshan himself had done.

The man smiles. It doesn't reach his eyes, which are so dark there's barely any difference between pupil and iris.

Hiraya studies him for a long moment. "Is that your real face?"

The man laughs. Now his smile *does* reach his eyes, but that doesn't make Hiraya feel any better.

“Ah—my daughter. What incredible resemblance. Did you know that was the first thing your mother ever said to me?”

Without waiting for Hiraya’s answer, Atun’s face changes before Hiraya’s eyes.

The man in front of her now is no less regal than the one who had just been there, the fine-featured northerner with steel grey hair. This man has a wide, strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, and eyes so sharp Hiraya would feel physically pinned to the chair even if she weren’t restrained.

“What do you want with me?”

Atun’s goatee is neatly trimmed, and he thumbs at the base of it beneath his chin as he considers Hiraya. “I apologize that we must meet this way, my daughter. Once the problem of your captors are dealt with, we will discuss this like family.”

“Discuss *what?!*”

“Your mother, and you,” he answers, unfazed by Hiraya’s outburst. “We would have met a lot sooner had your mother not been hiding you from me.”

There’s darkness around our family, nong.

Mae kept us safe as long as she could.

No matter what, no matter how much you’re tempted to, <u>do not</u> take off your necklace.

Instinctively, Hiraya starts to raise a hand to her neck, then winces as the restraint tightens again.

She forces herself to still. She takes a long breath, regroups.

The serpent hisses and instantly Hiraya is back on edge.

“Torgul,” Atun says in what sounds like a warning tone. “Enough.”

“Torgul,” Hiraya repeats, slowly.

The name is familiar, but Hiraya can’t immediately place it. Atun nods, evidently pleased to see her try. “Yes, *Torgul.* The Serpent of Srinagarind. He’s been with me for many years, ever since the witch who hexed him died and he was unable to change back to human form.”

Hiraya knows the story. Much like the Spider, the Serpent has been a legendary figure for centuries, one used to warn small boys off of wandering too far into the forest after dark.

Unlike the Spider, though, the Serpent’s tale had a second part to the legend. Furious and grieving over the loss of his oldest son, a clever witch left his younger son in a tree outside an abandoned hut near the edge of the forest. But when the Serpent approached the boy, a shadowy, headless pugot burst from the hut and grabbed him by the tail, carrying him high into the trees to eat him.

He managed to escape. He tracked the father down, meaning to take revenge. But the clever man was onto him again, and before he could strike the man hexed him, binding his magic and trapping him in snake form.

His serpent form was small at the time. Eventually, he got his revenge, lying in wait for the man behind a plant in his garden

and striking him, killing him with his venom. And it was then that he realized his mistake: rather than lift the hex, the Serpent found himself trapped, unable to ever change back. The keys to the hex had died with the man.

That was centuries ago. Hiraya pieces together the rest: because snakes never stop growing, of course Torgul is huge now.

“So the legend is true.”

Atun nods again. “It is. As you know, many legends are derived from the truth, some closer than others.”

That statement is loaded. Hiraya is sure of it. And her hunch is quickly confirmed when Atun walks around the table, then behind Hiraya, pulling out the chair next to hers along the side of the table and turning it to face her.

“Do you know why your mother hid you from me, Hiraya?”

She has no idea. But the pieces are coming back to her quickly now, her mind working hard pulling up memories of a day Hiraya had never thought much of until this moment.

She’d been eleven at the time. About to transition into the secondary phase of her fundamental studies. There had been a man at the house, one who Hiraya had never seen before, but who had made her mother yell and cry in a way she’d never seen before. Had made his father raise his voice before he’d pulled her mother inside.

It had scared her. It had scared her so much that she'd gone into Arawan's room and pulled him into the closet and made him huddle in the dark with her until the man was gone.

That was the day they'd gotten their necklaces. Hiraya had never put the events together before then. But the man had never returned, Hiraya thought, until—

Suddenly there's a memory shoved into Hiraya's mind. Atun is walking up to their home again, where he finds Suhat just outside the door, talking with his mother. His mother looks frightened, angry; Suhat's expression is flat and unreadable to Hiraya, but Atun's memories tell him Atun knew Suhat was there because he'd known Atun would come.

Where was he?! Hiraya thought. She doesn't remember this at all, can barely tell what day it is—but she recognizes her mother's dress, pale yellow with white imprints of hibiscus flowers all over it. The dress she'd been wearing the day she'd—

No, Hiraya thinks.

Mae had told Arawan to take Hiraya somewhere. They hadn't been there—Arawan had taken her to the beach, but Hiraya hadn't been able to enjoy it. Even then she'd known something was wrong.

When they'd come home, their parents were dead.

The memory fades from Hiraya's vision. Her eyes are so wide they're burning at the edges as a cold, sinking dread sinks into Hiraya from head to toe.

“I did not kill your father,” Atun says, pre-empting Hiraya’s question before the words could fully form. “My brother did.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The falcon saw the snake first.

The mechanical dragonfly was asleep on a flat stretch of grass at the edge of a copse of trees at the end of the road. The tall man who cared for it was not paying attention. Neither was the falcon's familiar, though its familiar never paid enough attention. That's why she needed eyes that could see what she could not, why the falcon taught her how to let it be her eyes.

There was no time. The snake was ready to strike, and it was not aiming for his familiar. No; the snake knew the falcon was its familiar's eyes.

Something else was lying in wait. The falcon warned its familiar to stay alert. Gentle words had no effect, and then the snake moved and it screamed a last warning as it flew out of the serpent's reach, but this was of no effect either. The sorcerer had already appeared. The falcon felt its familiar's waking mind silenced as she fell instantly asleep.

And before the falcon could follow—before the tall man even emerged from behind the dragonfly once more—the sorcerer and the serpent vanished, taking the falcon's familiar with them.

The falcon wasted no time. It flew as fast as it could back to the house. Its familiar had been in such a hurry to leave that she hadn't closed her windows, so it flew straight through, past the open door and through the house, ignoring the mayura's indignant squawk at its velocity.

It made straight for the darkling's chambers.

The darkling was still in his bed. He had not seen or heard the falcon enter. That would not do. The falcon flew to the mirror and alighted on a heavy, unlit stand and shoved it to the floor, quickly jumping back out of the way.

The darkling's eyes opened at the sound of the crash.

"What—"

The falcon screeched at the dark idiot. When he did not stir from bed, it hooked its talons around more objects and flung them down.

"What *is it*—?"

The falcon screeched again and flew at the darkling, talons raised. The darkling raised his arm to defend and the falcon gave a warning scratch at his skin that drew stinking black blood, shrieking at him to get up.

"*Stop it*—why are you here alone, where is Hiraya—?!"

Not a complete idiot. Good. The falcon ceased its attack and landed at the darkling's side and entered his mind to show him.

The falcon felt the darkling's surprise when he saw.

"*No.* That's impossible, he's dead—"

The falcon bit the darkling on the hand.

"*Ow!* Okay, *fuck,* okay—do you know where she went?!"

The darkling eyes were afraid. This was good. He continued to stare until the darkling's eyes turned to understanding, then fury.

This was good. The darkling knew the deep magic.

The darkling exited his nest and stood and dressed himself simply, for he had been bare but for his stripes. They met eyes once more.

The darkling raised his bleeding wrist to his mouth and bit until he drew blood. Then he closed his eyes as it began to drip onto the floor. He became the darkling's eyes as the circle began to form.

The darkling held out his arm.

"Take me to her."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Atun is watching Hiraya carefully. The snake is watching her even more carefully, and it's the snake whose eyes Hiraya meets as Atun's's admission lands.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Her mind is racing. None of this feels real. She nearly starts looking around the room again in search of seams that would suggest this is an illusion or a false memory.

Hiraya jumps when she feels a large hand cover the back of hers over the restraints.

"My daughter—"

"I'm not your daughter," Hiraya snaps.

"But you could be." Atun's voice is urgent and harried, his eyes sparking with the need to *convince* her of something. "It's so simple, Hiraya. All you have to do is turn—you already *have* the magic, you'll be able to get through the door!"

Hiraya closes her eyes. She wants to laugh. She bites the inside of her cheek so that she doesn't do anything that stupid.

Of course it's not about her. Hiraya is a tool. That's all he *ever* is to this family, isn't it? Except she must have said that aloud—or Atun is reading her thoughts—because his desperation is naked on his face now as he leans closer into Hiraya's space, closing his hand tighter around the back of hers.

“Are you happy in that house?” Hiraya looks at Atun like he’s grown a second head. Atun looks *incredibly* earnest right now, so much that it makes Hiraya’s gut squirm with a different kind of uneasiness. “What are they forcing you to do? My brother’s branch of the family is *barbaric*—get your mother, stay *here*, and you’ll be *safe!*”

Again, Hiraya’s eyes fly to the serpent on the other side of the room.

Aside from a long tongue flicking out into the air once every minute or two, the snake hasn’t moved, but that’s no confidence at all. She meets the creature’s eyes again—

—and suddenly it’s not just the house, but the entire world that’s reduced to pale, brownish green and deep violet save two human shapes in a color Hiraya could not even begin to describe in words.

Hiraya hears a noise, turns her head, field of vision flying wildly around the room for a moment before it locks on the two figures again. Hiraya hears a hiss, then the long sound of a rattle.

Iiiiintruder.

The voice is barely a voice. It’s barely a *word*, more of a whisper, like the thing speaking has only the memory of language.

Hiraya backs up in her chair as though she had anywhere to go. She sees through the snake’s eyes as it begins slowly crossing the floor toward Hiraya and Atun.

What?! I don't—I'm not trying to—

OUT!

The bellow in Hiraya's head makes her ears ring like a gong from the inside. Instinctively, she tries to raise her hands to cover her ears, but this only makes the restraints tighten, now to the point of pain—

A sudden, ear-splitting *shriek* sounds out from inside the creature's head, and Hiraya's human eyes fly open as the wall the serpent was coiled against suddenly explodes inward as though struck by a great hammer, crushing the back half of the serpent's body.

The creature hisses in pain and rage, but it's pinned under the rubble, unable to free itself. It thrashes anyway, throwing yet more crumbling stone around that end of the room. The next second, Hiraya's familiar flies through the destroyed end, avoiding the snake's open mouth, and makes straight for Hiraya's restraints barely a beat before a thick coil of black races past Hiraya and wraps around Atun's neck like a whip, choking him.

A dark figure steps in past the rubble, then a second black whip flies out, this time toward the serpent, where it beheads the beast with a twist as though opening a screwcap bottle.

Roshan's dark features come into focus through the dust, his face twisted in rage as he sends the second whip straight through the dining table, splitting it in half. It winds around Atun's ankles, then the man is two meters off the floor and clutching at the black coil around his neck and his hands are running black with it, too, almost like it's liquid, like it's—

It's coming from his arm. The black coil is *blood.*

"You know better than to cross me," Roshan sneers, his voice barely human.

That's impossible.

Her familiar stops biting at the restraint around Hiraya's wrist and meets her eyes with more ferocity and protectiveness than she's ever seen in them.

Blood magic. More than Hiraya knew it was even *possible* to wield. A deeper perversion of magic even than sorcery, blood magic is powered by the user's life force—the only form of magic those born without a core can wield.

And it's costly. *Because* blood magic is powered by a user's life force, it drains their life force to wield it.

Hiraya looks down. There is black blood on the falcon's talons where they're digging into the arm of the chair. The falcon is looking at Hiraya as though daring Hiraya to challenge it.

What are you?!

Her familiar doesn't answer. Instead, an image of *Pricha* flashes in Hiraya's mind. Hiraya grits her teeth, nods once. The falcon flies off just as a wet, blood-curdling scream echoes through the room.

"You should have taken your chance at a quick death, uncle. Or was it not enough to be stripped of your birthright the first time you tried to steal from their family for your own gain?"

There's blood leaking onto the floor now. Red blood, blood from Atun's body. He's bleeding from the nose and mouth in a torrent. The next beat, his eyes burst in their sockets, leaving a bloodied red pulp in their wake.

His face is purple with lack of oxygen. Roshan laughs, sending the black whip of blood around his ankles further up his legs and easing up on his airways. This just makes him scream louder, loud enough that Hiraya grits her teeth and turns away, unable to move otherwise.

There's nowhere safe. Behind Roshan are the fragmented remains of the Serpent's body, now lying in a pool of blood amidst the rest of the destruction. And behind her eyelids are the wolves, the children, the darkness as it slithered into her mouth—no matter where she turns, there's no escape from the horror.

Another scream. Hiraya's eyes fly open as her familiar reappears, carrying *Pricha* in the backsheath in one talon and her component bag in the other.

Hiraya is never going to question her familiar about anything again. Ever. And clearly Hiraya is hallucinating by now with all of the shock and horror, because when a scaled hand the color of oiled bronze draws *Pricha* from its sheath just enough to cut Hiraya's hands free, Hiraya doesn't question it, just turns to accept the sword and cut her feet free as well.

Hiraya freezes. Before her stands a creature with the head and torso of a human and the body of a bird. The top of its head is wrapped in a gold feathered turban, long coils of deep brown hair tumbling down her back. Her face is the most beautiful face she's ever seen—sharp and angular, birdlike even in this

form, with black lips and fierce green eyes lined in thick kohl. She has a red jewel in the center of her forehead.

The two hold each other's eyes for a moment. Then the creature releases *Pricha's* hilt and disappears, her familiar flying to perch on the back of her chair and keep watch while Hiraya cuts her ankles free.

Hiraya holds to that phantom image as she works. Her ankles are bound as tightly as her wrists were and it's difficult to maneuver the blade around them without cutting herself. Still, it's impossible to block out all the horror, and Hiraya freezes as she hears something start to *sizzle,* then quickly finishes cutting through the last of the restraint until she's able to yank it free and stand.

Before him, Atun's body is swollen, engorged with additional blood that comingles with his own as it streams from every orifice. The black pulses back into Roshan—whose eyes are fully black now, the whites of his eyes completely overtaken—as Atun's blood begins to *boil beneath his skin,* and Hiraya tugs the neckline of her shirt up over her nose to block the smell and turns away, slamming her eyes shut and trying not to wretch.

She feels arms at her shoulders then, pushing her forward. Trying to get her to move, to *leave.*

I can't, Hiraya says.

The thought stuns her in its truth. Behind her, Atun's skin is burning, flaking off like chicken skin, and Hiraya winces and gags as she smells burning flesh and hears the sounds of bones snapping like twigs off a tree branch.

The next beat, Atun's bloodied teeth skitter across the floor like shards of broken glass.

Hiraya looks up. The thing in the air is no longer a person, she thinks as Roshan collects the draining blood and shapes it into the cut, then slices the corpse in half.

A beat. The black blood returns to Roshan. Atun's corpse hits the ground with a grotesque, wet sound, and once again Hiraya tries not to wretch.

And then Roshan falls.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Roshan wakes up once again being tended to by Hiraya.

They're alone this time—or, well. Almost alone. Hiraya's sword is strapped to her back and the falcon is perched on the strap of the sheath where it runs along Hiraya's shoulder, talons coiled tightly around the leather so they don't dig into her skin. Roshan's hand is in both of Hiraya's, and hers eyes are closed in concentration as golden light flows into his meridians, so much that it's lighting the edges of his sorcery marks in a way Roshan can see when he looks down at himself.

Even the falcon's eyes are closed. Roshan knows now that the bird is far more than meets the eye, and it's the bird he addresses first when he opens his mouth to speak.

"I'm sorry," he says.

His voice is barely there. It takes an alarming amount of effort to get the words out. It feels like there are cracks in his throat and the sound is escaping them before it can reach his mouth.

Hiraya's eyes open and Roshan sees in his peripheral vision as Hiraya tries to meet his eyes, but Roshan is still looking at the falcon, who is also meeting Roshan's eyes with an unblinking stare that makes Roshan feel like he's being speared through. "I'm sorry for taking you."

The bird closes its eyes again. Roshan supposes that's as much acknowledgement as he deserves.

Hiraya looks between Roshan and the falcon. "How…?"

“Blood magic.”

“I know that,” Hiraya snaps. She doesn’t let go of Roshan’s hands, though. “I *mean,* how did you find me?”

Roshan closes his eyes and sighs. “I don’t know. Your familiar showed me the way.”

There’s a long beat. Then there’s a sound from beside him, so quiet Roshan almost misses it. But Roshan’s eyes fly open when Hiraya’s grip on his hand suddenly tightens and Hiraya’s next breath comes out wet.

Hiraya is crying. Not a little bit, either. There are tears streaming down her face and her eyes are rimmed in red.

“Do you have *any idea* what you’ve done to your lifespan, Roshan?!”

Roshan scoffs at this, but there’s no malice in it. “Do you have any idea how old I am? It doesn’t matter. You should be happy to see the world rid of me.”

Hiraya looks away. Her tears are dripping off her face and into her lap, and despite the circumstances, despite everything—despite the fact he has absolutely no right, all he wants is to fold Hiraya into his chest and hold her while she cries.

Hiraya shouldn’t cry for him. She should save her tears. But still, she doesn’t let go of him, nor does she ease her grip. And her grip is strong enough that Roshan’s hand is starting to ache, but he cannot imagine telling her to stop.

“Why do you stay?” Roshan asks.

Hiraya huffs a laugh. The sound is bitter and Roshan hates it.

“I don’t know,” Hiraya admits. Her eyes close, but still she doesn’t let go.

He should let Hiraya go. He should let this curse consume him for the way he’s compromising her light. Even now. With her eyes closed, Roshan studies her, sees the way her hair is a bit oily at the roots and how her clothes are still covered in dust. Still spattered in blood, both red and black. There’s a streak of it against his middle from where she must have carried Roshan’s unconscious body again for the second time in as many days.

He thinks, anyway. It’s probably been longer. And as he turns his attention to his body, he feels the way his blood vessels have been made whole again, how the cut on his arm from the falcon’s talons has closed. No doubt Sarimanoc was here again at some point in the…well. However long it’s been. Roshan almost doesn’t want to know.

But Roshan does know two things. The first is that he does not want Hiraya to lose her light.

The second that he is deeply, irrevocably, and unconditionally in love with her, and there is absolutely nothing he can do about it.

Something grips Roshan’s heart, then. It feels like talons piercing into it, so deep and visceral he gasps with the pain. It feels like blood is running out of his chest, even though he knows it isn’t.

Hiraya's lights through his meridians flicker. His blood runs cold, then colder as the resentment that has built in his heart over all of these centuries finally bursts from its confines like an overflowing dam, first through his meridians, then through his blood. What's left of it.

He doesn't have much time left. Even before he broke stasis and went after Hiraya, he'd known what this would cost him. He will never be able to atone for everything he's done to her, but at least this way he won't hurt her anymore.

She should leave, he thinks. She should leave before she has to watch him die, because if she watches him die she will spend the rest of her life thinking it's her fault.

And that's the last thought Roshan has before he slips under into the black.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hiraya feels the moment Roshan falls asleep again. His hand goes slack in hers and his breathing evens out, though slow with fatigue.

Hiraya gets up. She's been beside Roshan's bed for two days now, barely sleeping, unable to make herself get up even as her mind and body had buzzed uncomfortably with echoes of the nightmares she'd experienced over the last several days.

She hadn't *wanted* to stay, not really. But the the thought of leaving was untenable. This man, this *specter* in her life, who she should probably have hated—it was as though if Hiraya stopped looking at him, he would die.

She should hate Roshan. Her body is stiff in ways she didn't know were possible, and her mind is numb with fatigue and anger and deep, *deep* sadness. For what Roshan has done, for what he has suffered; for what she herself has suffered, and for all of the thousand and one ways that none of this should have ever happened at all.

Sarimanoc had done a thorough job stabilizing Roshan before he'd left, enough that Hiraya hopes he's sleeping himself and recovering strength after repairing as much as he could of the damage Roshan's use of blood magic had done to his body.

Hiraya leaves the door to Roshan's quarters a little bit open as she exits, walking quietly down the corridor to the stairs that lead to the house's grand stone entryway. She doesn't pass anyone then, and she doesn't pass anyone until she gets

outside, when Toti materializes out of the stone and looks at Hiraya in a way she can't read.

"I'm just going for a walk. I'll be back."

The taciturn diwata nods once, but she still feels his eyes on her back until she descends the hill that takes her out of eyeshot of the house and out across the plateau. The falcon takes off, then, and Hiraya wanders, watching through its eyes as it looks out over the barren expanse of Kham Luk.

She's never given that much thought to why nothing grows here, why there's such a wide expanse between where the forest ends and where the house meets the edges of the sheer limestone cliffs that drop off to the sea. But she does now as the sun beats down hard enough that she fishes a scarf out of her component bag and drapes it over her head, then winds it around her neck to hold it in place.

As she walks, she smells the dust, the hint of salt on the wind. Her familiar isn't going anywhere or doing anything, really, just spreading its wings—keeping Hiraya in eyeshot as it circles above, occasionally diving down on currents of air only to fly back up again.

Hiraya's mind wanders. It wanders to the family whose roof she's been living under these past several months, this family that's been wound up with her own for her entire life and she'd never known. How this family might, in a strange way she doesn't want to dwell on for too long, be *responsible* for her own.

There's darkness around our family, nong. Mae kept us safe as long as she could.

Hiraya's fingers fly to her neck, toward where her necklace should be. The necklace that should have kept her safe. How perverse is it that the very thing that was supposed to protect her from this family was the very thing that brought her to their doorstep? The universe has a twisted sense of humor.

She's not sure how long she's been walking. She's been walking long enough that she's traversed several hills, and she's tired and out of shape enough that her legs are fatigued with the exertion. Her breath is a little labored as she climbs the last one.

Her familiar flies over a canyon, then, and Hiraya freezes in place.

There's darkness down there. Roiling, angry darkness, a sea of it that licks over the walls like black fire. Hiraya will never forget that darkness as long as she lives.

Come back, Hiraya says to her familiar. *Come back, it's not safe—*

A loud shriek resounds out over the plateau and Hiraya vanishes to the edge of the canyon just in time to see a black hand shoot up out of the darkness and pluck her familiar from the sky.

Her familiar fights the hand. The bird claws at it, trying to fly away, and Hiraya doesn't blink. She throws out her hand and a beam of light flies out from her—*the cut,* Hiraya realizes as it leaves her—and severs the hand, freeing the falcon from its grip.

The falcon makes for her. Hiraya holds out her arm, uncaring that she isn't wearing her falconer's band, just braces for the grip of talons into her skin.

It never comes. His familiar crashes to the ground just over the edge of the canyon walls, and Hiraya runs to it, scooping it up and carrying it back from the edge.

Hiraya falls to her knees. His familiar's feathers are shot through with black, its eyes threaded through with tiny tendrils of black resentment. Its breathing is labored; Hiraya can feel its hammering heartbeat.

"No. No, no, *no*—"

The falcon clicks at her, then chirps.

"No, *please,* please hold on, *please,* you're the only thing I have left—!"

In her heart, Hiraya knows it isn't true. She has Arawan, even though Arawan is now more Ulan's than hers. But she'll always have her brother. She'll always be able to come back here.

And she has Roshan, whatever that means. Whether or not she wants him. Roshan would never have gone after her if that weren't true.

But it doesn't matter.

"*Please.* I love you."

The falcon chirrups again. Then it stills, and a coil of black resentment rises up out of its chest and dissipates in the wind.

An ethereal, translucent bronze hand lifts Hiraya's chin as her tears spill, running fast and hard down her cheeks. Her eyes burn as she looks up into the softly smiling face at the other end of that hand—a beautiful face she's only seen once, and which she knows even now that she'll never see again.

"And I love you," says a voice like liquid sunlight, a voice like the wind itself, warm as a mother's hug. "Go."

"*I can't.*"

"You must.

What had Hiraya told herself? She'll never second guess her familiar about anything ever again. That feels like an empty promise now as the hand caresses Hiraya's forehead, brushing back her curls.

Then the creature walks forward and steps into Hiraya's chest, disappearing into her body and leaving Hiraya alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Roshan is at the lake house when he sees a fairy queen step out over the water.

She is resplendent. She looks like she's glowing, lit from the inside, the apples of her cheeks and the tops of her shoulders pink with the afternoon sun. There are flowers in her hair.

Later, Roshan would learn it had been Sarimanoc's girls who had dressed his mother up like this. Sarimanoc's girls love his mother's eyes, the bright laurel green all the brighter against her dark hair, and brighter still against the reddish brown pigment over her eyelids and the dark kohl that makes her look like a mischievous cat now. She's smiling as she folds herself down into a squat next to Roshan on the floating walkway where he'd been watching the fish go by, squinting against the bright sunlight.

The flowers have been woven into his mother's braid, a thick coil that winds down and falls over one shoulder. She has a translucent white scarf draped around her head like a hood.

Or perhaps like a veil.

The hem of her light dress starts to drift into the water. Roshan darts up and snatches it out of the way before it can, making his mother laugh.

"My darling summer sun, why so glum?"

"Your dress will get wet."

She laughs again. Her laugh is like windchimes, making her eyes crinkle at the corners so the freckles beneath them dance. She flattens her palms together and brings them to the side of her face, resting her head against them.

For a long beat, she just looks at Roshan. He feels her study him and doesn't know why. She's his mother—shouldn't she know him already?

"Do you know what's the surest mark of a seer?" Roshan shakes his head. She taps the end of his nose, smiling now and leaning in close, like they're sharing a secret. "He watches."

She stands again, and Roshan turns and follows her as she walks back to the lake house, throwing a wink at Roshan over her shoulder as she goes.

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He's a teenager, and his magic has manifested.

His magic does not come quietly. He wakes from a nightmare and a burst of dark energy explodes from his chest as he throws his arms out, taking shape into twin blades that arc out, severing the posters of his bed and crashing into the wall so hard they leave scars in the stones.

A moment later, Sarimanoc comes running into the room. He's wearing a pink dressing gown he's barely even tied.

"What *happened?!*"

Roshan stares at the wall like something is going to emerge from it and jump out at him, then meets Sarimanoc's panicked eyes.

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He's facing his father in the old dungeon. There's a prisoner there, apparently a dangerous man, if his father is to be believed. He's learned enough to know by now that his father lies, easily and often, whenever it suits his purposes.

Roshan just doesn't always know when his father is lying.

"Kill him, Roshan. Without touching him, and without magic."

Roshan's eyes widen. "Father—"

Roshan has never killed before. He's done things for his father, sure—horrible things, but he's never killed.

His father's look is stony and unreadable. "Or, if you would rather not do it yourself, make him do it. But you are not to leave this room until he is dead."

Then his father leaves, shutting the door behind him.

He isn't gone, though. He's still listening. Roshan steels himself, then hands the terrified man the knife holstered at his hip.

"Kill yourself," he says, then directs his next words into an order. "Slit your throat."

As the man complies, Roshan screams as the turn takes effect, scourging his body through as it remakes his magic from the inside out.

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His mother is at the lake house when Roshan goes to her again. One of Sarimanoc's girls hands her a bright pink cocktail of some kind in a tulip-shaped cup, and while her back is turned his mother pulls out a small glass vial.

The tonic is iridescent white. It throws a rainbow of color where the light catches it, there and gone. He sees his mother quickly pocket the vial again before the girl reappears, this time with several others, one of whom hands his mother a pair of paper envelopes as she sets a small bowl atop a stand above a candle flame one of the other girls ignites.

Roshan watches them for a long time from the shadows. His mother's back is to him as she drinks, then sets the glass down precariously at the edge of the table. Roshan sees one of the other girls scoot it further in while his mother's attention is on the girl who had given her the envelopes.

He watches his mother pull what appears to be a lock of hair from each of the envelopes and drop them into the little bowl of water, now boiling. Then the same girl pulls a necklace out from beneath her headscarf—a pendant, it looks like, though Roshan can't see the design. The pendant goes in as well.

Roshan can't hear them well. They're speaking in soft tones, almost like they're afraid of being caught, but their eyes are excited. All but the one who had handed his mother the envelopes, who is looking out toward the water—toward Roshan, unbeknownst to her.

Roshan feels a chill when he sees her eyes. Her eyes are pale, like his mother's, though more blue than green. She looks like she might cry.

Some time later, one of the girls carefully drains the water from the little basin into an earthenware jar, which she then caps and hands to the blue-eyed girl. That girl jostles a bit out of her daze and smiles as she accepts it. Then they all get up and leave, leaving his mother alone.

Roshan waits until the room quiets to go inside. When he gets there, he finds his mother slumped in her chair, her arms draped heavily over the back. Her hands are dangling toward the floor.

Roshan walks up to her slowly, quietly, avoiding her direct line of sight. He knows what he'll see if he meets her eyes.

"My sunshine, my star, my sweet summer breeze," Roshan hears in a light, airy voice once he's nearly entered the room. His mother giggles, but she doesn't turn around or otherwise attempt to move. "Come *here*, my baby. Let me see you."

Roshan doesn't fully intend to move, but next thing he knows he's in front of his mother.

Her head is tipped back toward the ceiling. There is a bright, unnatural smile on her face, and her eyes are open.

He calls for her, practically too low even for his own ears. But she hears.

"*Yes!* Ammi, that's me! Do you know what that means?"

She sounds like she's talking to a two-year-old. Roshan feels disappointment, disgust, and rage curdle in his gut, and he keeps his mouth shut so he doesn't let them out.

"Can you walk?"

"Can I walk! Oh, what a question! Can I walk the Karakoram like the *urial* or shall I prowl like *salangai?*"

Roshan doesn't know what these words mean. Whatever language his mother spoke before coming to Kham Luk, she'd never taught him.

She starts to sing, then. Still with her head tipped back, though at less extreme an angle. Scales with trap doors in the middle where the notes get stuck and circle around before continuing up or down. Eventually the notes crystallize into a song Roshan has heard before, though it's in her language and he has no idea what she's saying.

The girl with the blue eyes is watching from the doorway. Roshan meets her eyes, then turns on instinct when she nods toward his mother.

Roshan flinches when he turns. His mother is looking at him now, still with that overwide smile, still singing.

Her laurel-green eyes have gone white.

× × × × ×

His mother has a smell about her that all people have when actively in the middle of dying: old paper, wax, and the smell of

damp mildew, vaguely sweet. Her skin is so pale it's like paper stretched over her blood vessels. Her skin is cold and clammy.

Already the film of death is closing in around the edges of her eyes. One hand is on his heart as she sweeps Roshan's long hair back from his face.

"My love, you have so much anger."

Her voice is thin, wavering like the trill of a songbird. It should be beautiful.

Of *course* he's angry. Why wouldn't he be angry? The last time he'd seen her, he'd given her an ultimatum. He'd asked her point blank what she would choose between her love spells and him, and she'd just giggled like a little girl and started talking about signs in the stars.

That had been months ago. Perhaps longer. He's been skipping his visits, doing various errands and jobs for his father. Things his father won't lower himself to do, and which he'd never ask of Sarimanoc or Ulan.

But Roshan is the spare. The bastard son. The only one willing to do anything asked of him, and the one the Dragon had taken up on that offer.

His mother has no idea what he's had to do. Of *course* he's angry.

Her first hand falls. Her second is still over his heart. She holds it there for a long moment, her lips moving in what seems almost like prayer in her language. A language Roshan doesn't speak and now never will.

“Let love be the cure, my darling. Don’t let your resentment break your heart.”

× × × × ×

He floats. He drifts. He sends the mother of his child away. He searches all over the world for a cure. He creates the Rip when he can’t find one, a place to store the darkness that will otherwise overwhelm his body.

He works for his father. He does unspeakable things.

He sees Arawan with a glowing necklace outside on the porch of their chambers, yelling at Ulan. Several days later, he follows Arawan to the edge of the plateau, where he watches Arawan face his own sister.

Arawan’s sister carries a cultivator’s sword. The blade hums in its sheath as it begs to be drawn. The blade must know it’s in the presence of something it was meant to destroy; if Roshan had a human mouth right now, he would laugh.

Instead, he stalks out of the trees toward the witch who has gone a little too far from home.

He expects the girl to draw the blade. He does not expect the sudden feeling of suffocation across the core of his magic, an unbreakable film that smothers it and renders him incapable of touching it. That blocks him before he even *can.*

“*Remove it,*” Roshan growls.

× × × × ×

Be careful what you wish for, he tells himself now.

× × × × ×

Roshan is in a dream state. The world around him is white and viscous. He's in his room, but it's through a thick haze almost like a veil, one that somehow both drowns his vision and renders him unable to speak.

But he can still hear what's happening outside. And in a way, he can see it. He sees his empty room, knows that Hiraya is not there. He assumes Hiraya has left.

There's a blanket hanging off the arm of the chair Hiraya had dragged to Roshan's bedside. Roshan wonders if it's still warm.

He feels the memory of Hiraya's touch. The warmth of her magic. Something he'd never told Hiraya was that when Hiraya touched him, when she sent her magic into Roshan, Roshan could not only wield, but *feel* the true form of his own magic beneath all the resentment. He wishes he'd told her, how maybe it would have helped her help him. How, Roshan doesn't know, but perhaps she could have found an answer amidst all her science.

He should have told Hiraya about his curse. He's not sure why he didn't. Was it to protect her? To prevent her from feeling additional urgency around breaking the hex? If he'd done that, maybe Hiraya would have found a cure by now.

But if she'd found a cure, she would have left.

Has she left now? Roshan can't see anything of hers still in the room. She'd packed up all of her alchemical supplies when she left the first time, before she'd been taken. Before Roshan had gone after her with blood magic.

The vision before Roshan's eyes shifts, then, and Hiraya is curled on his lap. She's looking at Roshan as she strokes his face like a lover, then dips down and plants a kiss against his bare chest, tracing Roshan's marks with a fingertip. Lifting her head and watching them clear as she drags her finger across his skin, leaving an ephemeral trail of gold in her wake.

It changes again. Hiraya is still in his lap, but facing him now, her chest bare, her long legs spread across Roshan's thighs, shins bracketing Roshan's hips. She sinks down on Roshan's cock and rolls her hips, bringing them flush. She throws her arms over Roshan's shoulders as her head tips back, her lips open with her breath.

Roshan bands one arm around her lower back, the other diagonal across her shoulderblades, gently cradling her head as he lays Hiraya back on the bed without separating them and climbs over her, sinking back inside her on a long thrust that makes them both moan.

She's so beautiful like this. Roshan wants to bring her over the edge again and again, to dip his fingers into Hiraya's brilliant mind, to help her give in. To show her the depths of the unimaginable pleasure Roshan can give her.

The vision fades before Roshan can get the chance. Before he can get the chance to tell Hiraya how much he loves her. His brightest sun, his north star.

Dark is the day, light is the dream, his mother's voice echoes. *The darkest of sunlight has fallen asleep.*

It’s then that Roshan decides to stop fighting. Hiraya does not love him, *should not* love him, and she never will. But Roshan is selfish, and he does not want to live a life without her in it.

The light fades. Roshan lets the nothingness pull him under as the world around him goes dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There is no body to bury.

The dark coil of resentful energy that had come out of her familiar's body dissipated in the wind along with her familiar's life, both of them scattered as easily as smoke. But as the falcon—the *kinnara*—steps into Hiraya's chest, suddenly her vision comes alive and for a single moment that holds many multitudes within it, all of a sudden, Hiraya *sees.*

Her familiar had watched her for years before revealing itself. The bird had *met* her *mother*—the day Atun had come the first time, perhaps even earlier, her familiar had watched over Hiraya when her mother could not.

Is that why she always seemed so happy when the falcon was around? Hiraya wonders this now as she watches herself from her familiar's eyes the day they'd met, what had been an otherwise normal day in the last year of her fundamental studies. She'd seen the bird watching her from their neighbor's rooftop while she'd done her numerics homework, her father's abacus and book of ratios out in front of her while she worked on problem sets until sundown.

The setting sun was no problem for her. She'd recently learned how to summon sunlight, and she'd just snatched a ball of fading twilight out of the air and wound it around her hand until it was bright enough to see with, then placed it in the receptacle on her desk.

At the sound of beating feathers, she'd looked up to find her familiar sitting in the windowsill.

At first, she'd held very still. The falcon's eyes were sharp, almost like they'd been daring Hiraya to look away. She hadn't, and when she'd tipped her head a bit in curiosity, the bird had done the same, until Hiraya had slid her hands into the pockets of her trousers and sat back in her chair, waiting to see what the bird would do.

It hadn't done anything. The bird had actually looked away first, turning out to watch when several young children ran by outside Hiraya's window, shouting at each other over protests from one of her elderly neighbors.

"Their names are Sakchai, Metta, and Darawan," Hiraya said to the bird. "If there are four, then Anitthi, too. He's the small one."

The falcon had looked at Hiraya with a questioning look—not like it didn't understand, but as though she thought it was stupid.

"What's your name?"

The falcon had replied with about three indiscernible seconds of shrieks and clicks, then a little whirr of amusement as it looked at Hiraya expectantly, as though waiting for her to try and pronounce it.

She'd never asked again.

"I'm Hiraya," she told the bird anyway.

She sees what her familiar had seen in that moment: the golden fields of energy emanating off Hiraya, so similar to her

own. How they'd fascinated the falcon, how it had wanted to pluck some of them away and carry them back to its nest.

There would be no need for that anymore, the falcon had reminded itself. An echo Hiraya hears now, in the present, one that hurts so deeply Hiraya brings a hand to her chest.

When she looks down, that hand is glowing in the same fields of gold.

It's not just gold. It's like a film, like sheer black fabric dusted over in gold leaf. Hiraya sees the shape of her hand, but *more*—the light bends off of it in ways that shouldn't be possible, like there's something covering his hand that the light can't get through. It leaves trails in its wake.

What is this?

For a beat, the vision before Hiraya's eyes shifts. She's holding a dark star in her hand. Not dark like the resentful energy, but like the opposite of light, its darkness born of the fact it was made of something the light couldn't pierce.

The great scatterer, she thinks.

She has no memory of this. She's seeing this from her familiar's eyes, Roshan shirtless and standing so close to Hiraya that it's like they're dancing. Memory-Hiraya doesn't look afraid.

Roshan, though.

This must be the memory Roshan erased, Hiraya thinks. Hiraya sees the curling, browned pages of the old alchemical recipe for glass of antimony open on her desk, the refractory rig she'd set

up to catch the sunlight to make a pigment for her mother on the windowsill where she'd left it that day. The deep, jagged swaths of black over Roshan's body, so thick and dark in places it's like someone has dipped him in ink and just left it to run down his skin.

He's glowing. They both are. Roshan's face is rapturous, his eyes closed as he holds Hiraya to him. Despite the memory alteration, Hiraya feels the sense-memory of the dark energy move through her body—apparently Roshan had forgotten to erase it. Hiraya had just had no precedent for it and couldn't have called it back to mind even if she'd tried.

Hiraya feels the touch of Roshan's hands as he secures his cloak over her shoulders when he'd seen her shiver in the Barren Forest, hears the metal-on-metal sound of Roshan unsheathing *Pricha.* Hears the sound and feels the shock wave of the stone wall at Dahn Bon Hak exploding into the room; hears that whip of black blood split the dining table through like a lightning strike.

Sees Roshan's resolute face from the falcon's eyes as he held out his bare, bleeding arm, letting the falcon sink his talons into his flesh without flinching.

"Go," her familiar had said.

All of a sudden, Hiraya knows why.

She gets to her feet, still looking at her glowing hand. In her peripheral vision, the world doesn't look right; the sky is black, the plateau almost green, like she's looking at a negative image. Her entire body is glowing.

She vanishes back to Roshan's room.

Roshan is white as a sheet beneath his marks. His eyes are closed, his breathing shallow. His marks are blacker than she has ever seen them. They seem almost to be writhing on his skin, darkness itself come alive and looking for something to devour.

The darkness is hungry. Hiraya knows this.

"Go," she hears again.

Hiraya picks up Roshan's hand.

It's cold. It's *too* cold, colder even than when he'd come to Hiraya after he'd given himself over to the darkness.

The darkness stills where it's coursing through Roshan's body, a murmuration devouring what's left of his warmth. Hiraya feels it smile, hears it bare its teeth.

The darkness knows her, Hiraya realizes. It recognizes her, it's been waiting for her. The smile Hiraya feels is that of an ambush predator who has just lured prey into a trap. Like it knew she would return.

Like a lurking pit viper, the darkness strikes.

First one, then two inky tendrils of black wrap around Hiraya's forearm to the elbow, a third winding itself around her and Roshan's joined hands so she can't pull away. She tries anyway.

"Ah—!"

"*GO,*" she hears again.

But Hiraya understands now. She grits her teeth and *pulls.*

She's not trying to get free anymore. No. And the darkness must sense her intent somehow, because the six or seven new tendrils of black that have wrapped all the way up her arm to her shoulder now start to hiss and scream, shrieking like a boiling teapot as they start to burn away. But they're just the edge of it, and Hiraya knows that too as she feels a roiling wave of darkness well up inside Roshan like magma in the heart of a volcano.

There is more beneath what Suhat purged, Hiraya realizes. *Far* more. Suhat hadn't exorcised his son, he'd just restored him to how he'd been before Roshan let the darkness inside him.

Suddenly, Hiraya is alight with anger, furious and blazing with it. Considering the rest of this darkness is made of the same resentment as what had flowed through Hiraya on the mountaintop, she doesn't doubt Suhat could have purged the rest of it. But he hadn't. He'd left his son to die after Roshan had done what he asked.

Roshan has lived his entire life in search of his father's approval. He'd killed his father's brother on his father's behalf. No doubt Suhat could have done that himself too, Hiraya realizes then. It doesn't excuse the horrors, not even close, but for a beat, Hiraya understands—just like she understands that Atun had been telling the truth about who had really killed her parents.

Hiraya steels herself. She reaches forward, grabbing handfuls of the darkness where it seeps out at Roshan's wrist. She winds it around her own hands as it starts to thrash in her grip, the cold burning away as Hiraya pulls and pulls at the heavy, thick

sludge, seemingly endless stores of it. Hiraya can't feel the bottom. She hears a sound like a growl, feels it scrape against her throat still parched with dust and salt from the plateau.

She hears that shriek again. Like a hiss and a scream and a swarm of bees, the sound so high and grating she feels that same sandpaper feeling against her *eardrums,* and the next beat Hiraya shouts again as gold talons pierce through the ends of her fingertips.

"*I hate you,*" she growls, slicing through ropes of thick black tar. "I hate you *so much. You did this to yourself,* and you *hurt* me, and now you think you just get to *die* and not face the consequences—?!"

There's another scream. A different tone now, raw and feral like a raging animal.

Like a snarling wolf.

"*Face me,* you *coward!*"

IF YOU INSIST, Hiraya *feels.*

It's not Roshan's voice.

Again, inky blackness shoots out and envelops Hiraya's arms, this time both of them. But they don't stop there. Rather than tacky, dried blood, Hiraya gasps as something like freezing, liquid smoke pours over and then *into* her, into her eyes and down her throat until it swallows her light and she feels like she's underwater.

The darkness is trying to smother her.

Hiraya fights her way up as it comes and comes, and *comes,* that magma chamber of five centuries of resentment that had somehow made room for itself in one man's heart. One single stubborn man whom Hiraya had bound herself to—whom she'd been bound to long before either of them knew it, perhaps. Or simply one whom a fortune teller many centuries ago had seen cross her son's path.

"DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM
THE DARKEST OF SUNLIGHT
HAS FALLEN ASLEEP."

"What was his mother's name?" Hiraya had asked Ulan and Sarimanoc that first night by Roshan's bed, the night after the massacre at Dahn Bon Hak.

Ulan and Sarimanoc had shared a look, then. One Hiraya hadn't been able to place, but which had almost looked like amusement.

"Kinnara," Sarimanoc answered. "Our little lovebird. Do you know what she called him?"

Hiraya shook her head.

Another time, Hiraya might think the look in Sarimanoc's eyes was mischief. But at that moment, she'd known better, had seen the shape of Sarimanoc's strange and jagged love for his youngest brother, Ulan's longsuffering frustration and hope that he would stop ruining his own life.

Sarimanoc was looking at Roshan when he answered:

“Sunshine.”

“WHAT ALWAYS IS NOWHERE
WHEN SHADOWS ARE GONE,
AND CASTS A LONG SHADOW
WHEN DARK IS THE DAWN?”

All those months ago, when Hiraya had seen the massive black wolf stalk out of the trees, she hadn’t blinked. She’d brought the magic suppressant for Arawan in the event he wouldn’t come willingly.

Now, all at once, she sees what she did not—but what the falcon had. The falcon had been her eyes as long as they had been together, and Hiraya’s heart twists with grief and desperation as she realizes just how much the falcon had truly seen.

What part of Hiraya had known from the beginning that Arawan wouldn’t come with her? What part of her had known she’d have to *take away the option?* And what part of her had been ready to lose Arawan to whatever dark force had led him to write that letter and try to erase his own existence from Hiraya’s memory if it meant saving his life?

“Mae kept us safe as long as she could.”

What part of Hiraya had seen the end of that protection even before it had arrived? What part of her was willing to risk everything to save her brother, but then to give up so easily when it became clear there was no battle to be fought? And what part of her *stayed anyway*—even in the face of the horror, the loss, the turning on its head of everything she’d

ever counted on, when there was *nothing keeping her here* but the desire to make the *one* thing right that she could?

What part of her had needed to save Roshan from himself, even when it was the wrong *himself s*he thought she was saving him from?

You're such an idiot, Hiraya thinks, not even sure who she's talking to, herself or Roshan. Her lungs burn with the cold as the darkness closes in on her, forming a dark shell around her, so close to the skin that it blocks her light even from her own eyes. She's not drowning now; she's being compressed from all sides, like the darkness is trying to fracture her.

"I don't know why I want to save you," Hiraya forces out as the darkness presses in against her body from outside, chilling her through from the inside, making it hard to speak. Her jaw feels numb. "It doesn't make sense, but the only answer I can think of is that I love you."

There's a stir, then. A frightened stir. She hears the shriek again before the darkness starts howling, whirling around her like a tornado. She's not sure if Roshan can hear her; she can barely hear herself.

Even with the power inside her now, she's no match for the darkness on her own. There's too much of it, and she doesn't know how to drive it out on her own.

Roshan knows how to get rid of this darkness. He's been doing it for centuries. But if Roshan won't do it himself, then Hiraya is going to have to make him.

Hiraya moves forward, then. This whole time, she hasn't let go of Roshan's hand, and she uses it as an anchor now to pull herself forward, a human shape of roiling black clouds amidst yet more clouds of darkness. She climbs onto the bed and over Roshan, watching him through the haze, and brings a hand to his heart.

Once again, Hiraya reaches for the solid darkness. The darkness is heavy here, like the crusted remains of a lava flow, but Hiraya reaches deep, drawing on her strength and all that dormant magic inside Roshan and grits her teeth again as she pushes down, every muscle in her body straining until finally—

A black liquid drip starts out of Roshan's chest where Hiraya's gold talons have broken skin. Instantly, the darkness clears for him, making for the hole as though to crawl back in.

Hiraya doesn't blink. She covers the opening with her hand and forces her way into Roshan's body, then his mind as she forces Roshan to *wake up.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Roshan feels the change before he fully realizes what's happening. He jolts awake violently, looks up to see Hiraya over him, creeping fingers of darkness grabbing at her like his monsters in the Rip. Except—*no, Roshan* realizes—they're not reaching for her, they're *trying to get away from her*. Beneath the roiling darkness, Hiraya is glowing like a star, right up until the moment that magic connects with Roshan's brain and all of a sudden, the star goes dark.

The change is instant. Above him, Hiraya *screams* in pain as the transformation takes, the change instant and irrevocable as black lightning sears itself into Hiraya's skin, starting over the back of her neck.

No, Roshan thinks. *NO, STOP—!*

Roshan pushes Hiraya off him, trying to sever the dark thread that connects them before it can grow any deeper. But it's too late. Hiraya's hands and forearms are seared with marks like a black whip, and Roshan looks between them in horror as Hiraya brings a hand to his chest and the thread anchors itself to his sternum, spreading little tendrils of black like a dark sun before dissolving into his skin.

She sways above Roshan, eyes fluttering. Roshan catches her before she can fall, holding her close to his chest with one arm while he climbs to his knees and starts to purge the darkness.

Hiraya, WHY did you do this—?!

“Because I love you, you fucking idiot,” Roshan hears near his ear. “I told you that before, but you didn’t hear me because you were too busy trying to die.”

Roshan lowers his face and buries a sob in Hiraya’s thick curls as she shifts against him, coming to her knees and throwing an arm over his neck, and Roshan feels Hiraya’s strength in his own body as they cast the darkness out together.

It doesn’t go quietly. The house shakes, and Roshan hears a distant *boom* from somewhere an instant before cracks start to splinter up the walls of Roshan’s chambers.

“We have to go,” Hiraya says. “It’s going to bring the house down.”

Roshan hesitates, disbelieving. But the next second, the cracks racing up the wall reach the top and Roshan hears a sound like a thunderclap as the high stone ceiling splits above them, and within half a second Hiraya’s arms close around him as she vanishes them both outside just as the ceiling starts to cave in.

They land hard on the plateau, far enough back from the house to be out of range of the collapse. Roshan loses his balance almost as soon as his feet touch land, Hiraya falling on top of him in the dust, her arms still wound around Roshan’s body. Roshan feels the breath punched out of his lungs.

Hiraya’s knees throb with the fall. Roshan feels an echo of the pain through his own, feels the ghost of fingers on the back of his own head as Hiraya runs a hand through her riotous curls, trying to stop the world from spinning.

Part of Roshan's brain wonders how he knows that. But most of it is white noise as he scrambles up while the house comes down in front of them, what's left of the darkness screaming and howling as it dissipates in the sunlight under a bright blue sky—

The hand not around Hiraya flies to Roshan's mouth as he looks up into a cloudless blue sky, broken only by the thick plumes of dust the collapsing house kicks up into the air.

Roshan hears the *pop* of other people vanishing near them, hears his brothers' and cousin's voices as well as Arawan's as they scramble to their feet. Roshan can't tear his eyes away from the sky long enough to look at them.

He feels Hiraya disentangle from him, hears and feels her turn to the others, already counting heads. Roshan sees sunlight glint off his own cheeks, where tears—*clear, normal* tears, no trace of black anymore—stream freely down his face.

He closes his eyes. They don't stop. All he feels is sunlight, both inside him and outside, warm and bright and *alive.*

The house doesn't come down quickly. Quick flashes of images in his mind tell Roshan his own chambers are the worst of it, his half-underground suite crushed from above under the weight of falling limestone when the roof had given in. So too with his father's chambers above his own and the dungeons below. Ulan and Arawan's wing fares the best, being furthest from his, and in between it's luck of the draw. Sarimanoc's rooms look like a great beast has taken a bite out of the center of them.

As for the rest, Roshan doesn't know yet. Hiraya had dragged *Pelamo* of all people off to the library a few minutes ago before

Roshan could stop her, and he himself has been so *taken* by the feeling of sun on his bare skin that he's found it hard to make himself move.

Roshan isn't sure how long he stays there. It could be minutes or hours. But eventually, he hears someone run up to him and looks up to see Hiraya holding a hand out to him, her curls wild and framed with a pale halo of sunlight where she's blocking the direct sun.

She holds a hand out to Roshan. Roshan takes it and lets her pull him to his feet.

He hears Sarimanoc sobbing loudly from somewhere nearby. His oldest brother is wearing a set of pale gold damask robes trimmed in orange, fuchsia, and deep violet, and he's squatting down beside a pile of rubble and the remains of one of the dungeon doors with a hand in both of his. Sarimanoc's white mayura is at his side, its long tailfeathers dusty amidst the destruction.

Ulan is standing beside Arawan, who is watching Sarimanoc. Arawan has an arm around his mother. His mother is staring off into the distance, vaguely wistful, like she's looking out into a memory.

Ulan turns to Roshan as he approaches, explaining without Roshan needing to ask.

"He went for her when the house started to come down. And he kept it from collapsing long enough for the rest of us to get out."

Sarimanoc wails, then, falling to his knees and folding over their father's arm where it's tucked into his chest.

For a few minutes, Roshan just watches the scene in front of him. He has nothing to say, nor can he quite bring himself to feel remorse.

He'd never hated his father. But he did resent him. It wasn't like how he'd resented his mother, either; his whole life, nothing had meant more to him than his father's favor. He would, and *did,* do anything for his approval, only to have so little of it actually matter to him.

Now, though, Roshan reins his thoughts in. His father's body probably isn't even cold yet. He can be angry later. For now, Roshan just wants to find Hiraya, though he does bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling when he hears Arawan echo his thoughts aloud.

"How is it fair that he gets an honorable death after everything?"

No one answers. Ulan is still looking at Roshan, studying him like a foreign object. Roshan squares his shoulders and takes half a step back, suddenly defensive.

"What?"

"Hiraya," Ulan says, looking past Roshan now at the sound of footsteps traversing the rubble. "Take off your jacket, please."

Roshan feels his hackles flare as Hiraya stops most of the way toward them and turns around, then unclips her backsheath and shrugs out of her school jacket.

There are two gasps from this side. One is him; the other is Arawan.

"*Hiraya—?!*"

Above the neckline of Hiraya's white linen tunic, her deep orange Jin School tattoo is shot through with sorcery marks.

Without turning around, Hiraya brings a hand to the back of her neck. Roshan watches her trace exactly down one of the jagged black marks without being able to see it.

"I can see it," Hiraya says, which makes no sense. Hiraya huffs a laugh.

Then she sets her jacket and sword aside and pulls off her shirt, unconcerned for modesty; this time there are three gasps, then Arawan drops his mother's hand and starts running up to Hiraya.

Starts being the operative word. Arawan gets about as far as Roshan before he freezes in his tracks as Hiraya whirls around and fixes him with a glare. Roshan watches Arawan settle slowly back down, hands raised.

Again, Ulan looks at Roshan, then walks up to Hiraya.

Hiraya lets Ulan get closer than he'd let Arawan. He has a hand up to trace the marks as well.

His hand never makes contact. Roshan *sees* the moment Hiraya compels Ulan to stop. But he doesn't hold Ulan there, and Ulan pulls his hand back in front of his own face and studies it, then looks at Hiraya again.

It's Arawan who speaks next. "Hiraya…nong, I never wanted this to happen to you."

"You didn't, Hia. I chose this."

For a long beat, Roshan just looks at Hiraya. Hiraya's hands and forearms still have ropes of inkbrush black up them all the way to her shoulders, where they swirl around before descending elegantly beneath her collarbone to a black sunburst on her chest.

But it's not just the dark star. There are tracks of what looks like gold leaf all over her skin, most prominent on her chest, though when Hiraya turns to face him and her marks catch the light, Roshan sees where the edges of the mark of corruption bleed gradually from black into gold.

She doesn't look real. She's far too beautiful. She looks like a god. And Roshan only realizes he's staring when Hiraya's brows cross and she walks past Ulan, shrugging back into her shirt.

"Roshan…your eyes."

"Hm?"

Hiraya is sparkling now. Wavering at the edges. She raises a hand to Roshan's cheek and runs a thumb under one eye, then the other.

"Your eyes are…*green.*"

And then, suddenly, he's seeing himself: seeing his own face, fresh tear tracks cutting through dust and dried blood, both red and black, and bleeding at the lip where he must have bitten

through skin in the fall. His eyes, which are glimmering in the sun, and which have taken on color for the first time in five centuries.

Roshan nods. It's about all he's capable of, because Hiraya is touching him willingly and her hands feel—*cold.*

Roshan frowns. "You're cold."

Hiraya lowers her hands and shrugs. "It's fine. It's passing."

"…That's my fault."

Hiraya shoots Roshan a look that tells him a dozen things. Even the ones that should feel bad make Roshan feel butterflies in his stomach.

He reaches for Hiraya's hands.

"…Oookay, it's time for us to go." Ulan says from somewhere. He's probably talking to Roshan. "We're going to the safe house in the north. Will you be coming?"

"Not yet," Hiraya says. "Soon."

Roshan sees Ulan nod over Hiraya's shoulder before opening a portal.

"Wait—*Ulan,*" Arawan says.

For the next ten seconds, Roshan watches as his brother and Arawan appear to have an entire nonverbal conversation. For a beat, it looks like Arawan is going to fight Roshan on whatever it is—but then his shoulders sag and he nods, the fight leaving

him on a long gust of breath as he looks imploringly at his sister.

“Don’t be too long,” Arawan says to Hiraya as he ushers their mother through the portal. Hiraya rolls her eyes, though Arawan can’t see, which makes Roshan smile.

“Sure, Hia,” is all she says.

And then they’re alone. Mostly. Sarimanoc is still there, but after about half a minute Roshan hears him sniffle loudly before opening a rip of his own, then he and the mayura step through without another word, leaving them *actually* alone.

Hiraya turns back to Roshan, then, and Roshan is completely overwhelmed. His chest is going to explode. His body feels like it’s full of rushing water and electric sparks of joy.

He tugs on Hiraya’s shirt like a grasping child. Hiraya huffs a laugh, but she stays still as Roshan steps into her slowly, giving her time to refuse.

When she doesn’t, Roshan’s joy threatens to burst. They’re nearly skin to skin now. Hiraya is looking down at Roshan’s chest as she traces his marks, following them down to a new one just beneath his heart. What looks like a puncture wound.

Hiraya flattens her hand over that one, and Roshan gasps as Hiraya’s magic floods into him.

It feels different now. Before it felt like effervescent gold, warm like morning sunlight. Now it’s like lightning, fast and abrupt, both hot and cold at the same time, and when Hiraya pulls back

Roshan feels something like the rapid fade of an adrenaline rush all throughout his body.

His hands find Hiraya's waist, then. Again, Roshan sees little flashes that must be coming from Hiraya, because they're definitely not coming from him. The flashes are his own face, rapturous as he runs his hands all over Hiraya's *very literally* golden skin, watching how the sunlight plays over it. Sunlight he can now see and feel just as vividly as he feels Hiraya's soft skin under his hands.

He can't help himself. Because Hiraya is here and Roshan cannot believe Hiraya is letting him touch her, but also because he can't stop. He pulls Hiraya closer, until their bodies are flush and Roshan feels that new radiance dance over *his* skin. He tucks his face into Hiraya's neck.

The mark he'd left what must be almost a week ago now is still there, barely. It's down to pale green and yellow now, nearly gone, probably doesn't hurt anymore. Roshan presses his lips to it.

"I knew it," Hiraya says.

Roshan pulls back only enough to run his nose along the edge of the mark. "Knew what?"

He kisses Hiraya's neck again, a little higher this time. Her hand finds his forearm.

"Knew it was you who erased my memories. That mark gave it away."

Roshan runs his tongue across it, relishing her shiver. "Did it."

“It did. Clearly I need to teach you some things about memory alteration.”

That sounds like a dare, so Roshan slips easily into Hiraya’s mind on his next breath, relieved to see her mind still has the same sunset glow it had last time Roshan was here. Even with Hiraya’s sharp memory, though, the maze he sees before him is relatively small.

“Excuse you,” Roshan hears audibly.

“You are young, my love. It’s not an insult to your intelligence.”

Again, Hiraya shivers. “I’m going to have to get used to you being honest with me.”

That stings, but it’s true, and Roshan doesn’t argue. He also has no intention of lying to Hiraya ever again.

“You couldn’t if you wanted to anyway, I can hear your thoughts.”

Now Roshan does still. Without letting go of Hiraya’s waist, he pulls back enough to look at her.

“What—*no,* don’t stop, that feels really good—”

He’d been purging Hiraya’s pain. Not a lot, just the stiffness and fatigue in her muscles that Roshan is able to feel in his own. Roshan arcs a brow, but he continues where he left off and the relieved sigh Hiraya lets out makes Roshan feel like a king. Roshan gets bolder with his touch, then, and Hiraya’s core twitches as Roshan runs his thumbs down the sides of his abs until they curl around his hipbones.

He wants to kiss Hiraya again. So he pulls Hiraya forward by the hips, cupping her face with one hand and banding his other arm around her back.

She brings a finger to Roshan's lips before he can close the distance.

"Roshan, your father's body is ten meters away."

Roshan frowns at this. "I don't care."

"I do. We should honor the dead."

Roshan pulls back, one brow raised, only to see the mischief on Hiraya's face.

Hiraya breaks free and snaps her fingers. Her school jacket and sword fly into her open hand and she fixes Roshan with a look.

"Draw my sword and open a portal."

Roshan's body moves without his consent, then, for reasons he suspects they're going to have to talk about soon. Beside him, Hiraya just laughs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The thing about portals is that in a manner of speaking, a portal is owned by whoever opens it. That means the person who opens it is the cart's driver: that person steers, which, in general, means they have to have an idea of where they're going.

Hiraya takes Roshan to a secluded beach near where she and Arawan lived before Kham Luk. Specifically, she takes Roshan to an old watchtower that was apparently used by pirates to scout for boats to raid. And she'd fed Roshan the location by depositing the image and, for lack of a better way of putting it, the *context* around which she knows the place so that Roshan could 'keep it in mind' the same way Hiraya would.

And considering traveling by portal without a concrete destination in mind can *very literally* result in the traveler being split in half—or worse—it's a hell of an experiment for the first real test of their…mind meld, or whatever it is that's happened between them.

"Do you want me to spell it out for you?"

Hiraya asks this as she's on her knees on the platform, her back to Roshan as she fishes out supplies she'd hidden here under a stasis charm. Evidently she used to come out here to stargaze.

"And just to clear my head," she'd said when Roshan had asked about this place. "I guess you could call it my safe space."

He hears her pause her scavenger hunt for a long beat, then pull out a small wooden crate with a folded handkerchief at the bottom.

Hiraya sits up, draws the crate onto her lap. Runs his hand over the top.

Roshan knows what this is. Falcons don't build nests the way most birds do, Roshan has learned—they find places to nest.

"Yeah. This was my familiar's," Hiraya confirms.

"…Can I ask what happened?"

Hiraya laughs once, her voice already thick with tears. "You just did," she quips, but there's no malice in it. She taps the space next to her. "Sit down."

Roshan obeys.

Rather than tell Roshan, she shows him. Roshan physically feels his heart squeeze when he sees the hand shoot out of the Rip and pluck the falcon from the air.

"It's not your fault," Hiraya says, wiping tears now. She pauses. "Or, well. I suppose it's distantly your fault. But whatever is in the Rip…it isn't actually *you.*"

"But it came from me."

"Sure. But the thing about creation is that once the thing is out in the world…yeah, it *came* from you, but it *isn't* you. It just has your signature."

"I suppose."

Hiraya sets the nest back in the little cave she'd hid her supplies in, which is mostly empty now. The supplies are in a pile next to

him, save a blanket she's spread out over the platform. She turns intentionally to Roshan.

"Roshan. Do you know why I'm here right now?"

Roshan has absolutely no idea, and he says as much. "No."

She adjusts so she's mirroring him, putting them face-to-face.

"Besides the fact that I love you even though it makes absolutely no sense," Hiraya begins, and it makes Roshan's heart feel like it's full of bubbles despite the underlying truth, "before my familiar died…it told me I didn't need its protection anymore. Do you know why?"

"Why," Roshan asks.

"Because he knew you would die before you ever let anything happen to me."

Roshan closes his eyes. Tears well up quickly and spill over, and even if he could have stopped them, he wouldn't. Because it's true. He would, and *had,* already proven that to Hiraya, arguably twice over.

Hiraya scoffs at that. "Yeah, except the second time you were trying to die without consent."

"Details," Roshan quips.

There's no malice in that either. And when he opens his eyes again, Hiraya has climbed most of the way over him, and the look in her eyes makes Roshan feel a swoop in his gut.

Roshan backs up to the rough rock wall at one side of the old watchtower, out of the way while Hiraya lays out the blankets and other provisions that had been under stasis. Evidently she'd even stored food here.

Watching her do this is calming. Roshan doesn't actually want to be anywhere near his brothers or Pelamo right now. They mean well, probably, but even just the thought of answering a thousand questions about how he's doing, what he thinks about their father's death, or taking another tongue lashing from Sarimanoc make Roshan feel a bone-deep weariness, the kind a good night's sleep won't fix. And from the looks of it, Hiraya is having similar thoughts.

Hiraya doesn't confirm, though. Not verbally at least. Instead, a couple of minutes later, once she's arranged the supplies to her liking, she looks up at Roshan and crosses to him on all fours, then settles herself in Roshan's lap, throwing both legs over one of Roshan's and banding an arm across his shoulders. Roshan's arm comes around Hiraya's immediately to support her and he bends a leg at her back, watching her watch him.

Hiraya isn't looking at him. She has a hand curled on Roshan's chest, one finger tracing down the lines of Roshan's marks.

They're all still there. His constant use of the resentful energy inside him twisted the shape they would otherwise have taken, making them resemble the faceless creatures in the Rip. And he isn't using magic right now, but he may as well be for all that his touch is making Roshan's skin feel vaguely singed wherever his fingers pass.

And Hiraya's *hands.* They're so confident and skilled for someone so young. Even this touch is making Roshan feel

boneless, and he's hyperaware of every place their skin touches.

But Hiraya's hands are scarred, now. Ropes of black across the backs of her hands, even around her fingers and onto her palms. The marks wrap like ivy around her arms and they haven't faded. Already, Roshan is suspecting they won't.

"I don't mind them," Hiraya says, still tracing Roshan's marks, but after a beat she pauses and looks up at Roshan. "Do you?"

What—

"*No,*" Roshan says quickly. "I mean—yes, they're my fault, but—"

Roshan cuts himself off. He's speaking without thinking and doesn't know how to articulate his next words without sounding completely insane, but *you are the most beautiful person I have ever seen* and *I never want to not be looking at you* and *you are so radiant that calling you my sun feels reductive* all seem like too much, and—

Hiraya laughs. Roshan feels it more than hears it, because Hiraya has turned into Roshan's chest, burying her face in Roshan's skin.

A few beats later, Roshan feels wetness against his chest when the breeze stirs around them. Roshan feels panic seize him by the throat.

"Don't," Hiraya says, not otherwise moving. "I'm just feeling things."

Roshan holds Hiraya closer, letting his hand slip into her hair, relishing the feel of Hiraya's curls through his fingers. He places a kiss to the top of Hiraya's head.

"I love you."

"I know," Hiraya answers.

She sniffles, draws a hand under her nose that she wipes off on her trousers.

Then she tips Roshan's face to hers.

Roshan sighs against Hiraya's lips when their mouths meet. With one hand, he takes hold of Hiraya's waist, his other arm firm across Hiraya's back, drawing her close. And he lets Hiraya lead at first, slow kisses against Roshan's closed lips that nonetheless have him feeling like he's been shot through with electricity. Even just the sounds of their kiss make him want to crawl out of his own skin and ignite.

But Roshan is greedy. He's hungry, and the feel of Hiraya's lips on his only intensifies Roshan's craving for her. He draws his legs up more, tipping Hiraya further into his chest, and when Hiraya's arm slides further down Roshan's back Roshan runs his tongue across her bottom lip, then nips her there for good measure.

Hiraya opens for him. Roshan brings a hand to the side of her face to hold her still until Hiraya properly gasps for him, her mouth falling open.

Roshan is *starving.* He licks over Hiraya's tongue, draws her lower lip gently between his teeth, just long enough to make

her squirm. The hand on her waist skates down to her hip, and Roshan digs his thumb into the sensitive skin inside Hiraya's hip until Hiraya writhes against him, throwing her other arm over Roshan's shoulders until she's practically hanging off Roshan. Roshan adjusts her closer still.

But then, suddenly Hiraya breaks off from Roshan's mouth, lips red and kiss-bitten and breathing hard as she pushes back on Roshan's thigh, trying to get him to straighten his leg. Roshan obliges, though his brows draw down in displeasure at the distance between them.

Except then Hiraya climbs over Roshan, straddling him, and Roshan lowers his other leg as Hiraya again throws his arms over Roshan's shoulders. He rolls his hips, grinding down into Roshan.

"What did you dream of, Roshan?"

Roshan feels himself white out a little, his eyes fluttering. He's felt his cock stirring to life off and on since before they portaled here and at the feel of Hiraya against him, even through the layers of fabric between them, Roshan feels a hot rush of blood down his body and straight to his dick.

"Which time?"

Hiraya looks down between them for a beat, then her eyes fall to half mast.

Roshan has never noticed how warm Hiraya's eyes are. They're rich brown, even the slightest bit orange in certain light. Her eyelashes are so thick and dark they cast shadows over them.

The heat that has quickened in his blood pools in his gut, all the more as Hiraya smiles mischievously and says, “pick one.”

Roshan drops his gaze to Hiraya’s chest. Her linen tunic has slid down one shoulder; this close, the faint brushstrokes of gold in her skin glint like fish scales in the sunlight, subtle and faintly iridescent, a stark contrast to the inky black that swoops and swirls down to the dark star on her chest. But when Roshan ducks forward and places a kiss just below the dip of her collarbone, her skin is soft and warm, a little musky with the sunlight, and Roshan has to close his eyes as a wave of feeling overtakes him.

He tracks his hands all along Hiraya’s sides as he kisses over her chest, groans softly in pleasure against her skin when her hand comes around the back of his head and her fingers slip into his hair.

“Is this what you want?” Roshan asks, voice low and breathy.

Hiraya’s hand in Roshan’s hair tightens as she tugs Roshan’s face up to look at her.

“I already know what you’ll do for me. I want to know how much you *want* me.”

She lets go of Roshan’s hair. Roshan drops his face again and for a long moment, he breathes Hiraya in again, letting his lips ghost over Hiraya’s collarbone as he slowly tightens his hands at Hiraya’s sides, letting his fingers dig into Hiraya’s flesh.

“Mark your words,” he warns.

He drops his hands, wedging them under Hiraya's thighs as he lifts Hiraya off of him and slides out from under her. But before Hiraya can otherwise move, Roshan is pushing at her chest and laying her out on the blanket, then following her down.

Roshan feels Hiraya's eyes on him as he climbs over her body, trailing his hands down the length of her arms before grabbing her wrists in one hand. Then he flattens his palm over both and sits up, grinning a bit as he watches her fight the hold.

"What—?"

"It's just your wrists, my love." He trails his fingertips lightly over Hiraya's inner arm, which stills without Roshan's prompting.

"Yes but what did you *do*—?!"

Roshan puzzles at Hiraya's tone until he looks at Hiraya's face, where he finds not irritation, but curiosity. A curiosity that's hungry, every bit as much as his own desire.

A memory comes back to Roshan, then. Hiraya on her knees in her chambers at Kham Luk, surrounded by her alchemical equipment, tongue rolling over the tip of Roshan's cock as she stroked him off hard and fast. The him of the memory looks down at Hiraya working him like a puzzle she was trying to solve—a thought that had made Roshan desperate at the time, half insane with the thought that that's all he was to Hiraya.

Only half insane? Roshan hears in his thoughts.

Roshan arcs a brow. Hiraya still looks like she will give Roshan no end of hell until she gets her answer, but she also looks like

there's something she finds funny. Right now Roshan isn't sure he wants to know.

"You're really going to interrupt me right now for a physics lesson?"

Hiraya frowns at this. "I think you mean biomechanics."

Roshan rolls his eyes. "Teach me your science later. For now, shut up and let me worship you."

That gets the effect Roshan was looking for. Hiraya's eyes go a little wide as she draws a leg partway up, an action that makes her chest bow a little bit with how her wrists are restrained. And *that* motion makes the flecks of gold leaf in Hiraya's skin shimmer in the sun, and the last thing Roshan sees before he bends over Hiraya's body and starts kissing down her sternum is a flash in her eyes as her lips part and she draws a breath that Roshan feels under his lips.

He takes his time. Like a proper supplicant, he starts on his knees, but it's not long at all that he's on all fours over Hiraya, at least one hand tracking over her skin at all times as he licks and nips at Hiraya's warm skin, leaving marks over her clavicle and the inside of her shoulder, over the soft swell of her breasts on one side and beneath on the other. He sucks on a dusky brown nipple until it pebbles and hardens, swirling his tongue around it, pulling lightly with his teeth; repeating again and again, until Hiraya whines in discomfort.

He doesn't switch sides right away. He kisses down the flat expanse of Hiraya's middle, dipping his tongue into her navel. Roshan can feel solid muscle beneath his hands, but Hiraya has gone a little soft in her time at Kham Luk and Roshan loves it.

Loves that Hiraya's skin dips and molds under his fingers when he digs them into Hiraya's sides and core, loves that when he bites Hiraya beneath her navel, he feels more than just skin in his mouth.

A thought comes to Roshan, then. He's never *wanted* offspring, but the image of Hiraya round and fat with his child sends a burst of desire so strong Roshan sits up and closes his eyes as the image plays with him. Roshan's hand moves over her middle in the place where she would swell. And when the image releases him, he bends down over Hiraya again and pulls the band of her trousers down just the slightest bit, just enough to kiss her over the underside of her obliques.

And then he keeps moving. He noses at the seam of Hiraya's groin, stopping himself before he undresses Hiraya all the way without permission. He wants to taste her, wants to come all over her skin, wants to fuck her and make love to her and fill her with his seed until it takes. Wants to taste her, to fuck her on his tongue; to do all of this while he opens Hiraya's mind and body from the inside, while he turns everything in Hiraya's body that's capable of feeling pleasure toward him like sunflowers seeking the sun.

"You wanna make me feel good?"

Hiraya's voice is a little ragged. Her cheeks and chest are flushed, the marks Roshan left all over her already blooming red, some even a little purple. She's exquisite. Roshan never wants to not be looking at her.

I want to make you forget yourself and me and everything but the greatest pleasure you have ever felt.

“That’s a tall order,” Hiraya quips.

There’s no malice in it. Roshan looks up at her. “Is this you saying you doubt me?”

“I would never.”

Roshan smiles at this, a soft smile. He’s blushing a bit now too, and so he can continue to ignore it he busies himself with unfastening Hiraya’s trousers and tugging them down over her hips along with the strange short trousers she wears beneath. Hiraya lifts her hips, laughing a bit under her breath at Roshan’s ignorance.

“My underwear?”

“Under what?”

Now Hiraya laughs openly, and Roshan scowls as she balls up both garments and tosses them into the mouth of the little cave. “You too,” she says.

Roshan shakes his head. If he sees himself against Hiraya’s skin, he’ll be far too tempted to rush, and he would much rather take her while the sun goes down over the ocean.

“You’d make me wait that long?”

Yes, Roshan thinks.

“Even if I pout and bat my eyes at you?”

“How long have you been able to read my thoughts?”

Carefully, without signaling his actions through his thoughts, Roshan begins tuning Hiraya's body, turning every touch she feels into pleasure. "Not long," Hiraya answers. "Maybe an hour?"

Since you broke my curse.

Hiraya nods, but only briefly. She draws her leg up further, exposing herself as she rolls her hips up against nothing and twists a bit as the sensation starts to take.

"Spread your legs, sweetheart."

With neither protest nor delay, Hiraya obeys. She parts her legs, her body going loose under the hum of pleasure coursing through her, barely seeming to notice when Roshan moves between them and further bends Hiraya's leg against his side. Roshan skims his hand up the outside of Hiraya's thigh, then down her calf. And when Hiraya opens her mouth as though to protest, Roshan drops down to a forearm and licks up the inside of Hiraya's thigh, then nips lightly just beneath the join of her leg just to make her twitch.

He pauses, then. There is a bloom of wetness at Hiraya's core that glistens in the sun. A pulse of that wild, unchecked desire surges through him at the sight; he wants them both to drip with it by the time he's done with her.

Evidently Hiraya is already too gone to snark at him. This is good, because the pleasure she's feeling now is only a fraction of what Roshan will make her feel by the time she sits up again.

Still, Roshan doesn't rush it. Now bare, Roshan lowers his face and licks up the length of Hiraya's folds. Slowly, luxuriously,

savoring the way they part and curl under his tongue. He looks up at her again.

Hiraya's eyes are closed. Her flush has already deepened. The muscle beneath Hiraya's core quivers under Roshan's touch when Roshan drags his palms up it, then plants one on either side of her torso, stretching out like a cat above her as he drinks from her again, this time pushing into her with his tongue.

Hiraya groans at this, a shaky sound of encouragement Roshan grabs onto with both hands. He curls his tongue inside her, licking at her walls as though to coax water from a new well. It is a little salty, a little sour, and it's the first thing he's properly *tasted* in centuries. Roshan sucks at her lips again, then pulls his tongue forward, swirling it over the sensitive head of her clit before continuing to stroke inside her.

"*Roshan—*"

Roshan hears his name on the slightest gasp. It spurs Roshan on, excites him as he licks deeper inside Hiraya, closing his eyes and making a sound of his own against her core. He pulls off nearly all the way, tastes his lips; the more of her he tastes, the sweeter it becomes. He dives back in.

And *fuck,* the way Hiraya feels under his tongue—he could do this all day, perhaps might another time when he's less consumed by five centuries of desire that are all happening to him at once. And he has many regrets, but his biggest regret right now is that he has only one mouth and can only taste Hiraya in one place at a time.

Hiraya bucks into his mouth, arcing up off the worn wood of the platform, her toes curling into the blanket. Roshan takes it easily, and when Hiraya starts to mutter an apology he dives forward and pins Hiraya's hip with one hand, then drops to a forearm, once again holding Hiraya's leg against his own side as he buries his tongue inside her as far as it will go.

With how long he can hold his breath, this is easy for him. And he takes advantage of his long tongue, running it against the front of Hiraya's walls for a couple of beats before drawing it back, letting it drag through her as he pulls out nearly all the way, then again plunges inside her.

The fight leaves Hiraya slowly. Roshan eases up on the pressure on her hip, stroking his thumb back and forth along the ridge of bone as he works Hiraya open, smiling against her as he starts to stir his magic inside her.

The sigh that leaves Hiraya's parted lips as she realizes what Roshan is doing to her is honey-sweet. The feel of his surrender is sweeter as she shivers and goes pliant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It starts in Hiraya's core, the feeling of a softly buzzing electric current. But it spreads quickly, racing out through Hiraya's whole body, making her hypersensitive and aware of her entire body. *All* of her. Every cell, the cuticles on her fingers; her hair, the marks on her skin, the shapes of her bones.

She feels alive. *Awake.* The whole world is vibrant, every color amplified so much it's like Hiraya can feel them through her eyes.

And Roshan's aura. He has one again now that his magic is free, not that he's realized that yet—black, like all sorcerers, but shimmering in places with shades of gold.

The same as her own. But they don't behave the same way. Roshan's is like a curious puppy, a fine cloud that floats around him, often extending out as though with fingers to touch something. Hiraya's stays closer, like it always has, eddying around her like swirls of paint in water. Both of them are bright and stark in the daylight.

And there's magic all around them. There are residuals in the wood of the platform, soft shimmers in the leaves and stalks of the plants that fall over the cliffside, clinging to the rock. In Roshan's voice when he tells Hiraya to spread her legs in a voice that makes something inside Hiraya go liquid.

Roshan is compelling her somehow. He has to be. But she can't bring herself to protest when it feels so good, when pulling at the hold Roshan has bound her wrists in above her head makes hot sparks race down her arms and through her body.

And his mouth. His tongue. Hiraya sighs his name and Roshan dives down further, his hands scalding against Hiraya's thigh and hip where he pins her after she bucks into his mouth, chasing the heat inside her.

She's drifting, and yet she's never been more present. She closes her eyes and the world falls away, all but the wind and Roshan's mouth on her and the wet, obscene sounds that have Hiraya's toes curling in the blanket. Pleasure races along her spine and through her body; she feels a rush of wetness against Roshan's mouth. The current stirs, notching up in intensity, and Hiraya sighs as what's left of her fight leaves her and she stills in Roshan's hands, whining as he feels him lick across her entrance again.

And Roshan keeps her on the edge. She arcs into the feeling every time she feels her release welling up only to have Roshan bat it away, sending it back out and into the current of pleasure swirling through her. And it's so much—she already feels like she's in the throes of an orgasm, only for that feeling to dial *up* and *up* bit by bit until Hiraya can't keep her mouth shut anymore. She hears herself whimpering and whining as though from a distance, like the sounds are coming from somewhere else.

And then it stops. Partially. The pleasure hasn't stopped coursing through her, but Hiraya feels a breeze against her core and realizes Roshan has pulled off and sat up.

His eyes rake up Hiraya's body. Hiraya feels that stare and it makes her shiver. Roshan's sinful smile when he meets her eyes sends a jolt through her chest.

He lowers his hand between her legs.

"*Ah*—!"

Hiraya's eyes close. Roshan is stroking her gently—first two fingers, then three, making the current in her pulse with her hammering heartbeat until all of a sudden Roshan curls his fingers forward and it bursts like a star behind her eyelids. Hiraya hears herself shout as tears spill and her entire body goes white hot and she comes all over Roshan's hand, which Hiraya sees when Roshan's strokes slow for a beat as he looks down at himself, then withdraws his hand, looking pleased at the wetness there.

Roshan gives her no time to recover. Her aftershocks never stop, just join the current of pleasure inside her like a second voice in harmony. Even though Roshan is barely touching her anymore—when Hiraya cracks her eyes open again, Roshan is rubbing two fingers and a thumb together and the liquid on them has thickened, as though he's—

Roshan sits up onto his knees.

Did he just—?!

"What do you call this *changing something between forms?* Transmutation?" Roshan winks and lowers his hand to his cock, and Hiraya sees his breath hitch. "It goes both ways, my love."

Impossible. Hiraya is *good* at guarding alchemical secrets—

"Yes, you are," Roshan agrees, and that's as far as Hiraya is able to think. His eyes flutter as Roshan climbs over her and lines up, then lowers himself slowly down over her, blocking the evening sun. "Fortunately for you, most would-be thieves don't have *quite* the same head start."

Hiraya looks down. Roshan's cock is flushed—not grey anymore, but an angry red, ribbed all over with veins, and Hiraya feels a thrum of anticipation that makes him look up at her in surprise, then a shy kind of satisfaction. He strokes himself a couple of times, spreading precome down that's suddenly far in excess of what was already there, meaning—

Roshan winks again as he kneels between Hiraya's legs, parting them a little further before he arcs his hips forward.

He sinks inside on a single long, slow push. Hiraya feels her body unfurl for him from the inside, making a space for him as though Roshan were her missing piece. And when she reaches for him instinctively, it's only after her fingers curl around his upper arm that she realizes he has released her from the hold.

He keeps Hiraya there, bracing on his arms. When Hiraya's legs kick out reflexively, Roshan gently immobilizes them. "Don't fight me, love. Just feel."

Roshan's words are like a command, irresistible and sweet. Hiraya stills under him and Roshan rewards her by rocking gently into her heat as her body opens for him, a slow stretch that again has Hiraya moaning aloud, her head tipping back as she bares her neck.

Roshan makes a sound that's like a growl, low and satisfied and possessive. "You stay just like that."

Hiraya clings to Roshan as Roshan starts to move inside her. She wraps her legs around the backs of Roshan's, holds onto first his arms, then his shoulders as she bows up, seeking more, even as Roshan is so far inside her that she can practically feel him in her *throat*.

"*More,*" Hiraya begs.

Roshan doesn't obey immediately. He grits his teeth, brow furrowed, and it's nearly a full minute before Roshan winds both arms under Hiraya's bowed back and gathers her close, driving deep into Hiraya as he does.

It's clumsy, inelegant, and *raw* as they tumble like this. At one point, Hiraya twines her legs so thoroughly with Roshan's that Roshan has to disentangle himself before he can thrust in again; at another, Hiraya decides they aren't touching enough and rotates onto her front on Roshan's lap without fully separating them. At this, while Hiraya is still on all fours, Roshan mounts her, one hand flat over her chest and the other wrapped around her hip and onto her groin as he kisses down her spine, then gives it to her, his thrusts wild and carnal until suddenly, he stills.

Roshan spills into Hiraya on a shout, gathering her close and tucking his face into her skin as he shakes all over, both his body and his magic. His magic is vibrating now, a hum Hiraya feels all the way down to her *toes*. She presses her ass deeper into Roshan's groin, then wraps a hand around the back of Roshan's thighs when he feels tears against her skin.

But Roshan doesn't stop there. His tears dry on Hiraya's skin before he pulls out, but no sooner than Hiraya feels a trickle of spend drip out of her that Roshan is pressing down on Hiraya's shoulders, tipping his ass into the air, then dipping down again to *lick Hiraya clean,* and the sound and feel of that are so obscene that Hiraya feels another rush of wetness escape her.

Roshan doesn't care. And the feel of his long tongue inside her has Hiraya clawing at the blanket beneath her—at least until

Roshan hauls her backward again, then slides out from beneath her, pressing their bodies flush as he kisses Hiraya and Hiraya tastes something like starfruit and tamarind on Roshan's tongue.

I gave it a flavor, Roshan says in Hiraya's mind, not breaking their kiss.

I have so many questions, Hiraya answers, not breaking it either.

"Well then, good thing we have all night," Roshan says.

He's so close that Hiraya can practically feel the words on her lips. "Good thing," she agrees.

× × × × ×

Roshan falls asleep first. The sun has gone down by this point and Hiraya has come so many times she isn't sure how there's anything left of her. Were he awake right now, Roshan might have something to say about that, but he isn't, and honestly, it's incredibly cute.

Hiraya has long since put the *Obscure* charm back over the old watchtower to render it, and them, invisible again. Still, the charm is invisible from the inside, meaning Hiraya's view of the stars is unrestricted as she trails her fingers through Roshan's hair where his head is pillowed on her chest.

There's an absence there. He feels the absence of his familiar in his mind and heart. It's strange to think that this time yesterday, the falcon was still alive. It feels like multiple lifetimes have passed since then.

All the same, there's a stirring inside her that wasn't there before. And it isn't Roshan. The thread-bond is less intrusive than Hiraya realized it would be, more like a second, simultaneous presence it's strange to contemplate *hasn't* always been there. The feeling he feels right now is different, though, and without having to guess Hiraya already knows she will never have another familiar. Not like the falcon—

The kinnara, his memory supplies.

Roshan's hold around Hiraya is tight even in sleep, even though Roshan is the one lying on Hiraya's chest. He looks more peaceful now than she has ever seen him.

A thought possesses Hiraya, then. Hiraya grins to herself, grateful Roshan is asleep, as she closes her eyes and pictures the big black wolf she'd met at the edge of the plateau all those months ago.

The next second, that same wolf has his head pillowed on Hiraya's chest, his breath hot against her skin.

Roshan's fur is still black. Gone are the shadows that had trailed off him, though—those clouds of resentful energy. All of that is gone. And Hiraya smiles as Roshan lets out a big huff through his nose and tucks his huge wolf head against Hiraya's neck, then again—until Hiraya realizes Roshan isn't actually asleep.

Hiraya turns him back. Roshan's grin is unmistakable now, though he hasn't opened his eyes.

For some time, they stay like that: Roshan's head on Hiraya's chest, Hiraya's fingers through Roshan's hair. At some point,

though, Roshan gives up the ghost and turns over, propping himself up on a forearm on one side and cupping Hiraya's face on the other.

"My love. Whatever you're worrying about can wait until morning."

Hiraya nods. Roshan frowns, his brows drawing down like bowstrings, and it's so cute that Hiraya bites the inside of her lip so she doesn't laugh. But Roshan just settles back against her, though not before kissing gently down the column of her neck and turning onto his side, one leg and one arm thrown protectively over her as though anyone were trying to find them.

Eventually, Hiraya feels herself start to drift off. As she does, she recites the riddle in her mind one more time, grateful now to Roshan's mother for leaving behind a key.

DARK IS THE DAY,
LIGHT IS THE DREAM
THE DARKEST OF SUNLIGHT
HAS FALLEN ASLEEP

WHAT ALWAYS IS NOWHERE
WHEN SHADOWS ARE GONE,
AND CASTS A LONG SHADOW
WHEN DARK IS THE DAWN?

Hiraya holds a hand up to the night sky, sending her magic into them.

Her fingers still glow gold.